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Grappling with Scholarship on Pro Wrestling: Comparative Media Studies Inside the Ring.

Sam Ford

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**Grappling with Scholarship on Pro Wrestling:
Comparative Media Studies Inside the Ring**

Sam Ford

Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Honors Program of
Western Kentucky University

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Approved by

Abstract

Because professional wrestling is not a subject that easily falls under a particular academic discipline, studies of the sport/entertainment form have been conducted throughout academia. As an interdisciplinary work, this thesis offers three contrasting academic approaches in an effort to study not only wrestling but also the disciplines used to study wrestling. “Mick Foley: Pro Wrestling and the Contradictions of the Contemporary American Hero” examines a particular wrestling hero and the way he compares with traditional constructs of the American hero. Using textual analysis, this essay analyzes the potential meanings behind the presentation of the Mick Foley character on World Wrestling Entertainment shows. “Vince McMahon: Creating a Synergistic Pro Wrestling Media Empire” focuses on the ways in which World Wrestling Entertainment has created a product that crosses into multiple media forms. By approaching wrestling as a media business, this essay illuminates possible reasons why the company has been so successful in recent American culture. “Role-Playing in the Stands: A Symbolic Interactionist Ethnography of Wrestling Fans” highlights ways that wrestling fans become involved in live events. Using ethnographic research, this essay categorizes the levels of interaction of wrestling fans by examining the fans’ own perceptions of their role in the show.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Mike Perkins. His understanding and passion for professional wrestling and the universe that its colorful characters inhabit remain an inspiration to me today, and his critical observations during those early wrestling shows likely fostered my desire to be a lifelong wrestling critic—as he was.

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Introduction

Throughout my thesis research, people have asked what possessed me to devote such a large effort to studying a subject as disrespected as professional wrestling. After careful reflection, I have concluded that it is the ability of wrestling research to break the barriers of academic disciplines. Early pro wrestling research came from semiotics and sociology of sports. Wrestling was eventually examined through the lens of academic disciplines such as media effects, textual analysis, ethnography, gender studies, history, mass media studies, medical studies, law, and performance studies. I believe wrestling is an approachable subject from many different academic perspectives because it does not neatly fall into any one category. Wrestling's proletarian background makes it questionable as an art form and unlikely for traditional literary or dramaturgical analysis. Its scripted nature makes it difficult to study as a sport, but its use of athletic exhibition makes it not clearly drama, either. Its use of serial melodrama is complicated by its primary appeal to men, and its appeal to many different demographics makes it hard to study from a socioeconomic status. Its involvement of the audience in the live events and its violent themes make it more problematic—and potentially more dangerous, according to some—as to how to approach it as an academic subject. Thus, just studying wrestling from one academic perspective often fails to cover the full range of the show, its audience, and its place in American culture.

Contained in this collection of three essays are multiple approaches to studying pro wrestling. These studies reflect my own diverse educational background as an undergraduate at Western Kentucky University. However, in the spirit of interdisciplinary research, I must first spend some time examining my own history with professional wrestling so that the readers can understand what brought me to the work presented in this honors thesis.

My History with Wrestling

Pro wrestling was not an early fascination of mine. Instead, it was Thundercats and Batman, comic books and Sunday School. My father was raised with twelve brothers and sisters. The joke was that my grandparents got a new Ford every year and never had to trade one in. My mom was the sixth and youngest child in her family, as her brothers and sisters were all born a generation earlier. My grandmother, Beulah Hillard, was forty when my mom was born. My grandfather died at about 70 years of age; my mom was in high school at the time.

Samuel Earl Ford was born to David and Betty Ford on January 21, 1983, a time when my father was laid off from work. But my name meant “The Will of God,” and my dad had not too many years earlier been ordained a Baptist deacon. He would put it in God’s hands.

I grew up eating Sunday morning cinnamon rolls and playing with G.I. Joes by the wood-burning fireplace in my bedroom. The highlight of my week was Friday night, when Dad brought the weekly paycheck home. We could go to Wal-Mart, where I searched the aisles for the new toy lines...Snake-Eyes, Scarlet, Lt. Duke, Gen. Hawk, and the rest of the G.I. Joe gang. My early days were filled with the narratives I constructed for these figures, the battle-lines growing as fast as my weekly allowance would allow—and sometimes faster, if I were convincing enough to my parents. Otherwise, my routine was always interrupted by the terrible presence of James Stenbeck on CBS’ *As the World Turns*, and I sat mesmerized as my mom did her daily chores and glanced at the screen from time to time. Henry Jenkins would probably find that early connection to melodrama a precursor to my eventual fascination with pro wrestling, but I knew little about the world of wrestling at the time.

All I knew was that I was envious of my cousins, who had the newest craze in Kentucky and across the country: cable television, or one of those large satellite dishes in the back yard.

For my father, the antenna was the only way to go, and the four networks provided our television programming. Pro wrestling no longer came on the local channels, victim of Vince McMahon's attempt to build a national partnership with cable. So, while my cousins waged wars by playing "The Immortal" Hulk Hogan, "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, "The Honky Tonk Man," and, later, "The Ultimate Warrior," I was left to wonder at these mythical warriors they watched on television every week.

Professional wrestling was a part of the culture of rural Kentucky. Even though I had never watched a pro wrestling match, I heard plenty of times about my great-grandfather, Earl Jones, or my grandfather, Hubert Hillard, watching wrestling on the screen and not being afraid to shake their own fists at their TV sets. I heard all about Jackie Fargo's strut, Tex Ritter's dangerous piledriver, Tojo Yamamoto's sinister mind, and Jerry Lawler's brutal attack on Andy Kaufman on *The David Letterman Show*. Did that lead to the comedian's death? Some people thought so.

It wasn't until I was eight years old, visiting my aunt in Florida, that I got the chance to flip through cable, which my dad saw neither the budget nor the need for. While my younger days had been spent running outside and playing with my childhood canine friend Dan, I had already become quite the couch potato by age eight. Dan had died, and I didn't see any fun in playing by myself. I spent the week in Florida basking in the light of the television set and found pro wrestling.

The image on the screen was of a war-painted hero whom I recognized from the Nintendo games I used to play with my cousins. He was "The Ultimate Warrior," buried to his neck in dirt while a dark and intimidating presence, Jake "The Snake" Roberts, loomed atop him, repeating what I would later learn was his tag line, "Trust me." My father tried to make sense of the images by telling me all about the ways in which pro wrestling was a fixed show. I

was relieved. After all, I wasn't the violent type, and this was just the kind of show I could understand.

When I got back to Kentucky, I found a local channel that carried WWF wrestling on Saturday mornings as syndicated programming. Soon, I was watching as a newcomer to the WWF, "Nature Boy" Ric Flair, wreaked havoc with everyone in his quest for the World Heavyweight Title. It wasn't long until I even became brave enough to walk next door to the home of my neighbors, "Turk" and "Nita" Chinn, and ask if I might watch the flagship Monday night *Prime Time Wrestling* show at their house. Although my first visit left me scolded for attempting to wrestle a pillow during one of the matches, I was allowed every week to go over and watch the matches unfold on their set. "Nita" told me about her exploits watching wrestling when she was younger, showing me pictures of the wrestlers who used to wrestle on Bowling Green's Channel 13 and travel through the area in the 1950s.

From there, my relationship with wrestling grew. Eventually, the G.I. Joes were replaced with the line of WWF figures—The Berserker, Owen Hart, Skinner, The Bushwhackers, The Undertaker, "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan. In 1993, the WWF even came to the campus of Western Kentucky University, only an hour away from Beaver Dam, and I watched as Bret "The Hitman" Hart toppled Bam Bam Bigelow in the main event title bout. Soon, I was going to WWF matches in Owensboro and Evansville. Wrestling had become my main passion; comic books, soap operas, even school work was sometimes subordinate. I found the trading cards, the photo books, the wrestling magazines, and every other way I could think of to digest the WWF product. Little did I know that I was already fully immersed in the media synergy that I would later study formally.

My fervent desire for any product offered by the WWF was early evidence of the ability of the WWF's strong narrative drive to envelop its viewers. The continuing weekly storylines

that culminated in pay-per-view grudge matches, only to build a new set of matches for the next pay-per-view, provided me a never-ending set of narratives to follow as each wrestler on the roster moved from feud to feud. While I was not aware of it at the time, these weekly trips into the exaggerated, carnivalesque fictional universe of Vince McMahon were stoking an early intellectual desire to study these symbolic characters and their epic struggles.

The only piece of the WWF's synergistic empire that escaped me, though, was the pay-per-view.

I could only see the holy PPV events if they were released on Coliseum Home Video and showed up at Loney's Electronics or Sight and Sound Video in Beaver Dam. I had already rented and watched all the local videos I could find and had gotten caught up on all the major events of years past: the rock and wrestling connection of Wrestlemania I, when Hulk Hogan formed a partnership with Mr. T to take on the evil "Rowdy" Roddy Piper and "Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorff; the grand spectacle of Wrestlemania III, when Hogan picked up and slammed the mammoth Andre the Giant; and the grudge match between "Macho Man" Randy Savage and Hogan at Wrestlemania V, when the two former friends met in an event that will forever be known as "the night the Mega Powers exploded." Several times, I had made plans to watch the PPV events at a friend's house, only to have the satellite feed fail.

Finally, I found a savior. One of my many aunts, Geraldine, had married a former commercial voiceover man who had settled into a job working with troubled teenagers at the local alternative learning center. My uncle, Mike Perkins, and I were not close, even though I had seen him on a regular basis. When I learned that Mike became a fan through the Florida wrestling of the 1970s, though, and had an affinity for that Dusty Rhodes era of wrestling, I found my chance to watch pay-per-views.

Every month, I went to Geraldine and Mike's house to watch the matches and even perform a few with their son Colt, five years younger than I. Mike turned our monthly meetings into social events, cooking meals and asking me to invite my friends. He even waited patiently when my middle school years made me decide wrestling was no longer fashionable for me, greeting me when I walked into his house six months later by first welcoming me home and then warning my father that he was going to lead me down the road to sin and degradation. While my dad didn't dislike wrestling, he was never enamored by it and instead extended the invitation to Mike to come to church with him and leave the Sunday night wrestling matches behind. Mike, like me, was the only son of a Baptist deacon. Dad even excused the fact that my mom bought into the action as well and stayed behind with me to watch Bret "Hitman" Hart, "Heartbreak Kid" Shawn Michaels, and, later, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin defending the heavyweight title. Instead, he made the trek to his little Baptist church alone and returned after the matches were over to pick us up.

Eventually, the crowd that gathered at Mike and Geraldine's grew to the point that we all only had to chip in a few bucks to pay the bill. We came over an hour or two early, and my friends and I prepared for the night's matches by tossing my little cousin Colt around Mike and Geraldine's pool, enacting what we thought would happen for the evening. As WWF's competitor WCW grew in popularity, we started having two PPV Sundays a month. Soon, it seemed that I was at Mike and Geraldine's every weekend. The influx of wrestling and my desire to see it even persuaded my dad to buy cable television as a Christmas present, and I was able to watch the Monday night action from home.

In high school, I became more than just the 4.0 academic team member that sometimes seemed to befriend the teachers as well as the students. Wrestling was cool, and the basketball team found out that I had been watching it all those years between their Hulk Hogan childhood

era and the new “Attitude” era of their high school years. They could ask me what happened in between. Each of them had sworn to their families that they knew more about pro wrestling than anyone they had ever seen, until they met me. This was the whole gang that stampeded Mike Perkins’ house every Sunday, and he became the wrestling guru that would tell them about the old days.

At school, I became the bridge between the “cool” and the “not cool.” Our gang ranged from the lowest income families to some of the most well off guys in school. Sports stars, Top Ten students, eventual high school dropouts, and even the custodians all gathered in the halls with one equalizing factor: they wanted to talk pro wrestling. We took our wrestling so seriously that we even brought in a wrestling ring of our own and put on matches for the community, matches that continue to this day in my hometown.

In the past few years, I have watched the wrestling fervor of my friends die away, although the friendships remain. Most of them still ask me from time to time what is happening on wrestling or tune in occasionally and then ask me to interpret what has happened in their absence. My neighbor Nita died shortly after I quit going to her house to watch the weekly matches, and my uncle Mike was found dead my sophomore year of high school, lying back on the couch in front of the television, a massive heart attack catching him by surprise. The week before Mike’s death, I had gone to his house to watch the WCW pay-per-view Spring Stampede 1999. None of my friends had joined me on this trip, and Geraldine and Colt were out for sports practice for the night. Mike and my mom and I couldn’t get the satellite to work, so we just spent the night talking, talking about wrestling and about life.

It may be some vestige of that relationship with Mike that keeps my own love of wrestling strong. Or, as Mike’s own philosophy indicated, it may be something in my nature that makes me a wrestling fan. Dave Meltzer, the pioneer of pro wrestling journalism and the author

of *The Wrestling Observer*, once told me that he believes when wrestling gets into a person's blood, there's no way to get it out. For him, he justified his love of wrestling by making a living reporting on it. For me, I decided it was going to become my area of academic research.

I came to Western Kentucky University after graduating from high school in 2001. Just before I graduated, I had married my high school sweetheart. Amanda ran in the same social circles I did, but there was no question she was out of my league. After all, this was a girl that some of my friends were interested in, other friends who even knew what it was like to go on dates. Imagine my surprise when I found out I had the guts to call her. Imagine even more when our first date was to the Bad to the Bone Wrestling show playing in Central City. My friend Thomas had told me that night he could see it was going to happen, and she later told another one of my friends that it had been my attentiveness, picking the jalapeno peppers off her nachos and missing most of a match, that had told her I was something special. Whatever the reason, and whatever her disdain for professional wrestling, she stuck with me and even supported my idea, albeit begrudgingly, of studying pro wrestling as my honors thesis when I began at WKU.

My Intellectual Journey with Wrestling

I came to Western as a journalism major, attracted to the school by its strong reputation in the field. In my first semester, I had already decided to add English as a second major. Before I knew it, I had four majors and a minor and plans to go to graduate school. My work in communication studies, mass communication, journalism, English, and film studies were supported by a job at the Beaver Dam *Ohio County Messenger*, where I was hired as the only writer without an editor and charged with the task of filling the paper with whatever content I could. Not only did I cover local community events, city and county government, and features on interesting local people, I began writing "Inside the Squared Circle," a column that became

quite possibly my most famous—a column full of the latest wrestling news and weekly research into a list my friends and I had designated as “The Top 100 Pro Wrestlers of the Television Era.” The articles became so popular locally that they were used as examples to teach high school writing students when preparing for state writing portfolio assessments.

At WKU, I first surprised people with my wrestling research plans in the honors junior English class, which I took as a freshman. As a protégé of Dr. Deborah Logan, I planned a research project comparing the work of the heralded William Shakespeare with Vince McMahon’s WWF. The resulting sixty-some page essay, no matter how rough it looks to me now, impressed her enough to allow me to be the only freshman student allowed to present at the inaugural WKU Undergraduate Literature Conference. Unlike the other presenters, who read their more traditional academic writing, I presented a poster announcing a grudge match between McMahon and Shakespeare, the epitome of low class against the Bard of the English language. Of course, the tongue-in-cheek presentation was meant to illustrate how McMahon and Shakespeare were alike in some facets and how wrestling was literary in its own way, with my conclusion that they should be a tag team instead of opponents.

Although the Shakespeare piece did not end up being a part of my final thesis project, it did inspire me. I became convinced that pro wrestling was worth studying and became even more entrenched in my passion. I convinced Amanda to spend what little savings we had on trips to Atlanta for *Royal Rumble* and *RAW* and, in 2002, even ended up in Toronto on spring break for *Wrestlemania XVIII*, watching Hulk Hogan return to take on the newest popular wrestler, The Rock. Despite her threats to the contrary, my wife fed my sickness, getting me a subscription to *The Wrestling Observer* for my birthday and allowing me to buy the monthly PPVs and, later, to obtain a state license from the Athletic Commission to be a pro wrestling manager.

After explaining my research goals to the English Department, the Communication Department, and The School of Journalism and Broadcasting, I began working on several research projects. My four years of work have led to the three essays presented in this senior thesis. Some of the other projects will be opportunities for later research. As promising as some of them were, the ideas just could not be polished enough to be included here. These works-in-progress will be discussed in my conclusion.

My project has led to my co-teaching a class on pro wrestling during my final semester here at WKU. After I harassed her for several months to be able to teach the course, the Director of the School of Journalism and Broadcasting, Dr. Pam Johnson, agreed to co-teach the course with me. While she has handled discussing broader issues of media theory, I developed the syllabus using viewings and readings I had collected over the past four years. Dr. Johnson, the Honors Program, and the English Department made it possible for me to collect many pro wrestling books, both academic writing and memoirs, through their generous funding, and many of these works have been used as readings in the class. The class has even been blessed with visits from Dave Meltzer of *The Wrestling Observer* from San Jose, California; famed pro wrestler and bestselling author Mick Foley; Prof. Steve Beverly from Union University, who wrote a long-running newspaper column on pro wrestling for the *Columbus Ledger* and who completed his Master's thesis on wrestling's history on television; as well as a trip to Danny Davis and Jim Cornette's Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) in Louisville for a Wednesday night wrestling card taped for television.

An Interdisciplinary Thesis

This background has led to the three interdisciplinary works that are presented in this senior thesis. The first piece stemmed from a project that originated in Dr. Linda Lumsden's

Current Issues in Mass Communication class. We had spent much of the semester studying media synergy, so I suggested I complete my project on studying the McMahon family's WWE as an example of a synergistic media empire. The resulting essay presented here examines the WWE from a media business perspective, analyzing the company's use of cable television, Internet, DVD sales, pay-per-view, magazines, books, video games, and several other media to market their product to ardent wrestling fans. The piece, presented in April 2005 at the Central States Communication Conference in Kansas City, Missouri, was written with University of Chicago Style documentation and footnotes. Dr. Lumsden has worked extensively with me on her broader knowledge of media synergy and was the second reader for my thesis.

The second piece presented here originated from an interdisciplinary American Studies course taken with Dr. Anthony Harkins. Dr. Ted Hovet, my thesis adviser, was also an instructor in the course and worked with me on the project, as did Dr. Dale Rigby. The essay examines pro wrestling character Mick Foley and his unlikely status as an American hero, especially the ways in which he both confirms and denies traditional American ideals of the hero in our culture. This piece was completed with Modern Languages Association style documentation and was presented at the Far West Popular Culture Association Conference in Las Vegas in February 2005. It has served as my writing sample for graduate school applications, the only process I believe to have been more stressful than the completion of a senior thesis.

The final piece, currently under revision for *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, is an ethnography of professional wrestling fans at live events. This project began as an independent study through the Department of Communication with Dr. Sally Hastings. The project, approved both by the Honors Committee and the Human Subjects Review Board, involved my observing and talking with fans at live events to understand how fans interact with the wrestling texts. While the resulting essay was originally prepared in the American

Psychological Association documentation style, changes to prepare the essay for publication have led to many notable revisions, including a switch to University of Chicago scientific or “B” documentation style.

An Analysis of Interdisciplinary Work

As I graduate from WKU in May with majors in three different departments in the humanities, I have had an opportunity to analyze and compare the qualities of each of the three areas. The interdisciplinary research presented in the three chapters of this thesis complements each other, but each essay was written from a different academic discipline and in distinct documentation styles. While citation may seem a merely technical element of writing, it gives some insight into what ways various disciplines view academic research and especially its presentation. Each citation style chooses what information to rank above others, what details to illuminate and what details to deemphasize, and, perhaps most importantly, sets the tone for the piece.

I have found the University of Chicago style with footnotes as the most effective way to present information rich in research and prefer using footnotes as a friendly way to present sources to readers without making them flip to a works-cited or sources page at the end of the work. This use of footnotes makes my essay on the WWE’s media empire in many ways the most reader-friendly piece. It is thus fitting that the most voluminous citations occur in this essay, with business figures and examples of publications often making the text of the footnotes take up more space on the page than the main essay. The senior thesis project has even created a personal fascination with footnotes on my part, a fascination that has led to my writing essays on footnotes (with footnotes in it, of course).

MLA citation, in contrast, insists on in-text citations that refer to a work and avoids using footnotes. Here the citations become separated from the rest of the essay, giving the text full

reign on the page and leaving reference material as clearly subordinate and neatly contained in a reference section at the end of the document. These reference sections are especially useful for researchers, as they provide, in one central place, clear lists for further research on the topic.

The most interesting struggle for me was the citation style used for the ethnography, designed to be published in a sociological journal. I have little training in the social sciences, and many of the designations of the scientific documentation styles—APA and Chicago “B”—insist on an objective feel, a tone that I believe limits the author’s ability to express his or her experiences. The citation style of this more “scientific” essay is reflected in the prose as well, leading to a form of writing more formal in nature. As I discuss in my ethnography, the research process I immersed myself in saw me not as a detached observer but as an active participant, both as fellow fan and, sometimes, as performer. While I do admire the ways in which such scientific writing attempts to make research immediately heuristic, I found discussing my personal involvement in the research difficult through this writing style. For instance, the dislike for the use of the term “I” makes explaining my own role in the research problematic. Furthermore, when I received a revise-and-resubmit request from *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, much of the concern was not with the content—I only had one correction suggested from any of the reviewers as to my actual presentation of results, which was about a typo—but rather with a lack of clarity in the methods section, a need for focus in literature review, et cetera. These areas were likely lacking because, from my perspective, they were lesser in importance than the results. This is not to suggest that research from the social sciences has less importance than textual analysis but rather that the writing style was problematic because of my personal involvement, which was more suited to my journalism and creative non-fiction writing.

What I found most interesting is that the disciplines allowed me to examine the subject of professional wrestling in very different ways. For instance, my study of the American hero in pro wrestling was best executed through textual analysis of a particular wrestling character. A media studies approach or an ethnographic approach would not have benefited this study, just as studying wrestling fans in any other way than talking with and observing their experience through the tools of a formal ethnography would not have been as fruitful. I found that each of the disciplines I have pursued as an undergraduate has its own strengths, and this thesis attempts to mine each of these disciplines for those strengths in order to present the best possible research.

For many academics, the easiest way to approach wrestling is to dismiss it. Fellow scholars have said they faced various criticisms and roadblocks over the years: that research on wrestling was not applicable to any broader research themes and thus had no heuristic value, that those interested in pro wrestling could not read, and that the strange mix of fact and fiction in pro wrestling was so confusing that it was not worthwhile to pursue. Most of all, the argument has been that wrestling is low class. However, as Lawrence Levine outlines through his oft-cited analysis of “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” distinctions between high and low culture are becoming increasingly complicated in contemporary American society.

A generation of researchers has worked hard to disprove this and has written compelling work in many disciplines on pro wrestling. These essays and books are united not by the academic scope of the researcher but rather by the subject matter. Taken together, this body of work synthesizes many aspects of this subject. The problems that arise in researching wrestling from one particular discipline are erased if one adopts interdisciplinary approaches. The recent drive led by Henry Jenkins, Sharon Mazer, Nicholas Sammond, and others encourages a more nuanced view of wrestling. They have written essays that treat wrestling not as a gimmick or novelty piece for researchers but rather as a complicated form of art that does not fall clearly in a

particular discipline and thus is ripe for analysis from multiple angles. The resulting body of work, if researchers are able to dissolve the artificial walls of academic disciplines, leads not only to analysis of pro wrestling but also an analysis of academic culture.

I hope that my work is able to make minor strides toward this lofty goal of encouraging interdisciplinary research for pro wrestling. I have found the body of existing literature on wrestling to be slowly forming a solidified whole and have tried to illuminate some areas of research currently lacking. My goal is to make the essays that follow and the concluding ideas for future research an encouragement for further development of a body of pro wrestling research. More than that, I hope this work in some small way encourages further use of interdisciplinarity in the academic study of other subjects.

Mick Foley: Pro Wrestling and the Contradictions of the Contemporary American Hero

When professional wrestler Mick Foley won the World Wrestling Entertainment World Heavyweight Title on Monday Night RAW at the end of 1998, he became a heroic character in the realm of pro wrestling, then at its height of popularity on cable television. Many considered Foley unusual as a heroic figure. His character blended masculine heroic qualities of tenacity, endurance, and hard work with characteristics not usually seen in the American hero: a need for communal acceptance, a desire for intellectual growth, and an unattractive aesthetic, with Foley's missing teeth, severed ear, unkempt hair, pear-shaped figure, and lack of the muscular definition usually expected in the wrestling hero.

Mick Foley is a paradox, as his character both embraces and defies elements of the traditional masculine hero. This redefinition of the heroic figure in wrestling, according to Dalbir Singh Sehmy, stems from wrestling's complex relationship among fans, promoters, the media, and Foley himself (202). Nicholas Sammond writes that "whether professional wrestling is progressive, transgressive, or regressive (or all these at different moments) depends on how it

serves the social goals of its producers, performers, audiences, and its critics” (“Squaring the Family Circle”). Because of wrestling’s participatory nature, allowing fans to directly influence the product, wrestling heroes may perhaps be more indicative of the paradoxes in defining masculinity and American heroism than the heroes created through other media. The construction of Foley as hero reveals America’s changing and conflicting values regarding its traditions and its definition of masculinity. Foley’s character also illuminates the ways in which a media image can be appropriated to represent various meanings, depending on who is mediating and interpreting the text.

Pro wrestling might seem an unlikely lens to examine American culture through, but wrestling’s roots in America trace back to Native American and European cultures. The modern theatrical version of pro wrestling began in the post-Civil War era when ex-soldiers toured with carnival troupes, putting to use the skills they learned for recreation during the war. Wrestling then formed a strong bond with television from its infancy and has thrived on both national and local markets. From the 1940s until today, wrestling has retained a substantial television and live-event audience through a product that consistently changes as American culture changes. Today, pro wrestling is a billion-dollar business for the WWE, which airs on network and cable television, and in syndication with seven shows a week and monthly pay-per-view events. Wrestling still sustains an audience of several million viewers a week, even after years of this high volume of programming.

Because of this need to fill daily programming, today’s mass media make the mythmaking process almost instant. Heroes and myths are created in wrestling at a rapid rate. Marshall Fishwick finds that a wider variety of figures in today’s society is being nominated as heroes, and many of these heroes are increasingly compartmentalized for niches in society (The

Hero 3). This variety makes the hero both less stable and harder to define (Browne “Hero with 2000 Faces” 92). Popular fictional characters, in particular, have become a focus for analyzing the modern American hero because the characters are generally communally defined and are not as easily demythologized as actual people because their lives are scripted (Rollin 23). Pro wrestling stars are particularly appropriate for this examination of fictional heroes because of the active presence of fans in the hero-making process. Wrestling fans directly influence the product through an open feedback process by performing their own acting roles at live events, the roles of ardent sports fans. Sociologist Robert E. Rinehart posits that this aspect of wrestling makes it an avant-garde sport by allowing the spectator to influence the action (67). The appropriation of a wrestling hero by a vast number of “authors” explains, in part, Gerald W. Morton and George M. O’Brien’s contention that the wrestling hero is a complicated figure who cannot easily be generalized (141-153).

A growing body of scholarship has formed to analyze professional wrestling; however, this preliminary collection of work into wrestling’s close connection with American society, past and present, has only scratched the surface of an art form that provides an inexhaustible wealth of research material. Wrestling is a particularly apt way to study the culture of a particular time and place and an exaggerated visual text that provides many potential avenues to study the hero-making process in American culture. Pro wrestling is liminal, existing both as sport and drama, fact and fiction, all mediated through a web of complex relationships within the larger construct of the promoter, the media, the actors, and the fans. Furthermore, wrestling is a text that draws on a variety of dramatic conventions and a unique blending of “high” and “low” culture, reflecting what Lawrence Levine identifies as a contemporary questioning of distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” in American art.

Wrestling has been examined from a myriad of critical perspectives because of the rich possibilities its complicated narrative structure offers for various disciplines. Semiotician Roland Barthes claims that pro wrestling is “a spectacle of excess” (21) involving a symbolic show of suffering and justice through the hero’s struggle with the rule-breaking villain. Sociologist Erving Goffman further identifies this spectacular element of wrestling’s central narrative, the hero’s appropriation of rule-breaking to retaliate against an opponent who has broken the agreement of a fair fight between the two. Goffman claims wrestling’s excitement comes through this breaking of the audience’s perceived frame of fair play in sports (418). Anthropologist Jim Freedman defines this struggle between hero and villain as a metaphor for the struggle between the ideal of capitalism as a community of equal opportunity and the reality of capitalism as a lack of adherence to basic rules necessary for fair competition (71-73). Literary critics Gerald Craven and Richard Moseley believe that wrestling should be examined as a performed literary text, evaluated not on wins and losses but instead on quality of performance (326). Sharon Mazer has continued this performance-studies approach to wrestling by detailing the training process of the professional wrestler and the unclear line between “real” and “fake” in that process. Such an ethnographic approach has also been used by Nick Trujillo et al., whose study of pro wrestling fans identified the complexity of the audience and many of the incorrect stereotypes that audience is labeled with. James Twitchell writes about wrestling’s use of “preposterous violence” and examines the complicated distinction between violent performance as catharsis or as a stimulus for aggressive behavior. This is one of the main battlegrounds for contemporary critical analysis of wrestling—the debate of media effects. Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz’s film Wrestling with Manhood (2002), for instance, indicted WWE as purveyors of damaging stereotypes and narrow codes of masculine behavior.

The importance of identifying each of these critical perspectives—these selected critics are only a few of the growing number of scholars who have published work on wrestling—is that pro wrestling is unique as a cultural meeting place for these various methods to interact. As an interdisciplinary tool, wrestling allows various methodologies to complement each other. It is a particularly strong area in which to identify the strengths and weaknesses of various readings of texts. Only recently have scholars such as Henry Jenkins III completely come to understand the value of using these multiple methodologies to examine pro wrestling. Jenkins writes about wrestling as a media construction to analyze the companies that promote wrestling, the performers who act out the roles, the fans who consume and shape the product, and the growing body of critics who analyze and appropriate wrestling for their specific arguments and methodological perspectives.

Pro wrestling, then, is a microcosm of American culture, both because it allows for interdisciplinary readings and because it is so directly influenced by its fans. Wrestler Mick Foley's image provides the material for an effective case study of this mediation of contradictory elements in the contemporary American hero. Foley's character exists as an example of the conflicts embodied in the modern hero, conflicts that both accept and deny aspects of the traditional masculine hero model that has been considered the template for the hero throughout the relatively short history of American culture. The ways in which Foley both accepts and disproves these traditional assumptions provide not only an example of the complicated characters involved in pro wrestling but also the current society's struggle to define itself through its heroes after demythologizing so many long-held cultural beliefs.

The Star Image of Mick Foley

Mick Foley's character developed over the course of twenty years in pro wrestling. Following John Ellis's definition of the star as "a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances" (539), Foley's star image emerges out of his various fictional personas and the public dissemination of information about his private life that is incorporated into his star image. The image in wrestling is the fictional character depicted on the screen. These fictional characters are usually either heroes or villains, although they may change freely between the two extremes. Pro wrestling thrives on the relationship between these heroes and villains to build toward eventual grudge matches that fans want to see. Wrestling heroes and villains are defined chiefly through their opposition, as a villain can become a hero by engaging in a feud with one even more villainous than he or she. Similarly, a hero can become a villain by coming into conflict with a hero more popular than he or she. In the case of a change, the star image usually only alters slightly, as wrestlers generally retain their same basic characters. The chief difference is their view of the fans, as the hero-turned-villain usually abandons his or her supporters, while the villain-turned-hero embraces the fans he or she once despised.

In pro wrestling, the wrestler is the commodity, and every appearance is an opportunity to sell his or her character identity (Birrell and Turowetz 220). This commodification process likens wrestling to another form of public discourse, politics. The selling of President George W. Bush's heroic persona during his "War on Terror" has led to the cultivation of a protector-figure to respond to the terrorist attacks on America (Roper). Wrestling's connection to political life has often been articulated by former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, who admitted that

his understanding of marketing himself as a pro wrestler greatly informed his successful campaign for the governorship in 1998 (i.e., Ventura).

The wrestler is a particularly appropriate figure for a study of the star image as hero because, as Douglas A. Powell points out, wrestling often “blurs the line between truth and fiction” and creates ring identities that are hard to separate from the performer (62). The wrestler’s character may incorporate various aspects of the actor’s life. In Foley’s case, his stage name is his actual name, and Foley regularly includes his family and his personal life in his on-screen persona. In her ethnography of a training school for pro wrestlers, Sharon Mazer finds that the wrestlers themselves often do not know when they have crossed the line from actor to persona (Professional Wrestling 169-170). Despite this complicated integration, Mick Foley the star is not Mick Foley the actor behind this image, although aspects of his personal life certainly feed this star image.

This star image has a narrative that wrestling fans know well. Foley began as a wrestler in the mid-1980s, as Cactus Jack from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Cactus Jack’s image was labeled “hardcore” or “extreme” because of his love for brawling and the use of weapons in his wrestling matches instead of the more traditional approach of using wrestling holds and maneuvers. His image built on an aspect of the American hero that Robert Penn Warren defines as an ability to withstand hardship and even defeat while eventually overcoming the odds and achieving a “victory of spirit” through a strong sense of self-reliance (xxi). By hailing from New Mexico and taking the name “Cactus Jack,” Foley’s star image connoted the American West, a symbol for traditional masculinity and rugged individualism. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner finds that the American hero emphasizes “the self-made man” and “the freedom of the individual” (213).

Despite his early character's villainy, Foley's image was already developing many of the traditionally masculine attributes necessary for American heroism. He entered Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling (WCW) organization, and his Cactus Jack image became recognized nationally. The character competed there throughout the early 1990s, his image transforming from a psychotic mercenary hired by villainous characters into a sympathetic warrior embraced by fans because of his tenacity. Cactus Jack's rise to acceptance by fans included a case of amnesia and Jack's ear getting ripped off during a match with a rival in Germany, a real event incorporated into Foley's image. When Foley left WCW, his image further evolved through participating in "death matches" in Japan that involved barbed wire, fire, and other ultra-violent forms of competition. He then competed in the Philadelphia-based cult favorite Extreme Championship Wrestling, where his image gained a following among wrestling fans, although still usually treated as a villain.

By the time Foley was signed by Vince McMahon's WWE in 1996, his image was well known by most wrestling fans. The WWE complicated that star image by creating a new persona for Foley: Mankind. Foley came into the ring with a Hannibal Lecter style mask. His look further emphasized actor Foley's physical weaknesses, such as his lack of toned muscular development, his pear-shaped body, and his severed ear. Mankind was depicted as a sympathetic monster, deranged because of his scarred body and possible abuse as a child and now willing to take out his frustration on other wrestlers. Contrasted with Cactus Jack's toughness, Mankind was an easily manipulated character because of his intense desire for a father or mother figure, evidenced by his latching on to various personalities in wrestling, including the cross-dressing "Goldust" as both mother and father figure. At this point, Foley's image had developed into that of an underground hero, and the growing sympathetic element of his character counteracted

many of his violent actions. The significance of the name, Mankind, connotes not only his innocence but also his humanity and his primal nature.

Foley's image made the conversion from villain to fan favorite not through a particular change in his actions but through a four-part sit-down interview on Monday Night RAW in mid-1997 that made the character more three-dimensional and highlighted his sympathetic longing for acceptance. The interview included an examination of Foley's past by showing home videos from actor Foley's childhood of his pretending to be a pro wrestler. In the home videos, the young Foley demonstrated another persona, Dude Love, who used his initial rejection in heterosexual relationships to fuel a suave personality in the ring that made him a heartthrob among female fans. Both the Dude Love and Cactus Jack personas soon joined Mankind in the WWE, as all three characters fueled Foley's star image.

Foley's various personas strived to align themselves with other wrestlers, as Foley's image as one striving for acceptance continued to be cultivated. Vince McMahon's own star image, the evil Mr. McMahon, began taking advantage of Foley's naiveté. Foley's personas grew even more sympathetic as they attempted to fix their physical imperfections to impress McMahon. Dude Love bought false teeth, and Mankind began wrestling in dress clothes to prove he could be a "corporate champion." Nevertheless, Mr. McMahon always rebuked Foley in all his manifestations. Foley's characters always pushed a comic element, trying to cheer the ailing McMahon with a sock puppet when Vince was in the hospital, playing Twister with Vince to calm him when McMahon was being stalked by arch-enemy Steve Austin, and angrily taking back the leaf-blower he had bought McMahon for Father's Day when he thought Vince was like a father to him. Eventually, Foley's character came to the realization that Mr. McMahon was

manipulating him and stood against him, leading to his winning the World Heavyweight Title from McMahon's hand-chosen champion, The Rock.

Mankind, Dude Love, Cactus Jack, and aspects of Foley's personal life have all blended into one star image, Mick Foley. This short analysis of Foley's wrestling history is not meant as an authoritative look at his career but rather an identification of the key story that has created Foley as a particularly distinct contemporary hero. Like the super hero and his alter ego in comic books, Foley's personas interrelate and form one continuous character. Robert Inchausti writes that with the super hero "the multiple spheres of one's existence do not impinge on one another but achieve a kind of harmonious give-and-take" (71). This relationship among Foley's various incarnations has defined his overall character.

The growth of this overall character, Mick Foley, reveals important aspects of the way wrestling uses its multiple narrative forms to create a hero and the way that the hero is constructed by the media, the performer, and the fans. In addition, Foley's development embodies but also challenges aspects of the traditional masculine hero in American culture. Mark Gerzon writes that "emerging masculinities are unlike the old, not only in their emphasis on diversity, but because they are not based as much on tradition as on experience" (237). Gerzon's characteristics of the new masculinities—the companion, the mediator, the colleague, and the nurturer—both coincide and conflict with more traditional roles of masculinity—the breadwinner, the expert, the father, and the husband. These two strands are present in Foley's overall star image, as Foley is simultaneously typical and atypical. According to Michael Oriard, a star such as Muhammad Ali becomes notable as a hero for his "uniqueness and his typicality" (394). The same can be said for Foley, although his character bears no close resemblance to Ali. Mick Foley is a particularly appropriate avenue to study this ambivalent renegotiation of

masculinity and the hero because of wrestling's reliance on particularly narrow definitions of masculinity to create narratives of physical struggle. Foley's characters paradoxically renegotiate those narrow definitions by both accepting and rejecting aspects of them. His image will illuminate some of these contradictory themes in the modern hero.

Gender/Masculinity: Brains vs. Brawn

The criticism of wrestling's narrow definition of masculinity and its vilifying of any opposing views to that definition has been covered by many critics (i.e., Berger, Lincoln). However, the critical concern about the effects of such a narrow definition has been waged most broadly by Jhally and Katz, who attempt to connect wrestling's definition of gender roles with broad social problems relating to domestic violence. In a forthcoming essay, Jenkins refutes these arguments by claiming that by oversimplifying their subjects, such narrow readings of wrestling participate in the very "anti-intellectualism" for which these critics often condemn wrestling ("Wrestling with Theory"). He particularly attacks their unsubstantiated attempts to liken the ignoring of wrestling's ill effects to the ignoring of Adolf Hitler's rise in Germany. Wrestling has become a battleground for an argument that involves methodology (whether an examination of wrestling content can have only one possible reading), mediation (a singular writing of wrestling shows by Vince McMahon and his writing team or a communal definition of the product mediated by writers, performers, and fans), and gender roles (wrestling as one definition of masculinity or wrestling as a battle among conflicting masculinities). While wrestling glorifies certain aspects of the traditional hero, its treatment of masculinity is more nuanced than a simplistic reading would find. For instance, Jhally and Katz, in their analysis, do not consider the context of scenes they analyze in the overall narrative or whether the person

perpetrating a certain action is a hero or a villain. The contradictions in Foley's character and its affirming and denying of traditional masculine attributes are a fitting example for Jenkins' argument of a more layered reading of pro wrestling. A reading of a character such as Foley's in unambiguous terms ignores the importance of his many contradictions.

The chief struggle in Foley's masculinity is his role as both a pro wrestler and an intellectual. Foley's image challenges the long-held belief that being an American hero cannot involve intellectual achievement, a belief that the American hero emphasizes strength and practical application over analysis (Gurko 168). The writing and lecturing success of Foley the actor was incorporated into his character through Foley's bestselling memoir Have a Nice Day; his second bestselling memoir, Foley is Good...and the Real World is Faker than Pro Wrestling; his fiction novel, Tietam Brown; his three children's books; and his college lecturing tours. These aspects of his character have been heavily promoted by the WWE as a component of Foley's star image, a character who expresses a growing interest in flexing his intellectual muscles. Foley's achievements as a best-selling author and a college lecturer are now as essential to his narrative as his winning wrestling championships.

On its own, writing is not unusual for a wrestler, but Foley's character brags about his refusing a ghostwriter to help him tell his story and his handwriting of each book before it is transferred to a typed text. Critical acclaim for Foley's writing has led to even greater respect from wrestling fans. Fans have not dismissed Foley's writing as being for "eggheads," as Robert Penn Warren warns will happen to the writer in American culture. Indeed, the fans admire "the eloquence of tongue and pen" of their hero, contrary to claims by Dixon Wecter that such abilities are not emphasized for American heroes (485). The fans embrace Foley's writing, even

his section of media analysis and criticism in his second memoir, Foley is Good. Foley, then, represents a potential shift in the possible attributes of the hero.

Still, although professing to be an intellectual and a writer, the primary vocation for the Mick Foley character is professional wrestling. No matter how his writing impacts his character, Foley's success is most obviously defined by his abilities inside the wrestling ring to persevere and to successfully compete in individual competition with other wrestlers. Wrestling is a visual drama emphasizing alternations between what Reuel Denney defines as "scenes of dominance and submission" (133). Wrestling is, in short, a dramatic representation of individualistic struggle that some read as masculine in nature. Foley is a particularly physical competitor, generally preferring the use of weapons and fist fighting to the more athletic traditions of fast-paced exchanges of wrestling sequences or submission wrestling on the mat. Nevertheless, any simplistic reading of wrestling matches as completely "masculine" is problematic. For instance, Brian Pronger's examination of the homosexual segment of the wrestling audience and their interpretation of a heterosexual text to take on homoerotic meaning challenges straightforward, masculine views of a wrestling match. Chad Dell's study of female fan club newsletters in the late 1940s and 1950s and Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc's study of female wrestling fans and their use of the Internet to appropriate wrestling texts through supplemental fantasy stories also challenge narrow readings of a communal text.

Class: Mythic vs. Everyman

One of the chief sources of Mick Foley's popularity is his image's ability to tap into what Sehmbly identifies as wrestling's "central working class myth" (123). This myth involves an individual who uses his or her own body to battle against corporate corruption. However, as with the examples studied by Pronger and others in the previous section, both Henry Jenkins and

Nick Trujillo et al. warn that such an analysis only examines one portion of a large audience, such as the working class, and that any generalizations of a group as diverse as pro wrestling crowds exclude multiple perspectives (Jenkins “Never Trust a Snake” 50-51, Trujillo et al. 538).

Mick Foley exists in pro wrestling simultaneously as a representative of this “everyman” in American culture and as a mythical figure, a living legend. Such a contradiction is not surprising in a culture that creates heroes so quickly, a culture in which people can be considered legends when still in their primes. Because of mass communication’s speeding up of the mythmaking process, the number of heroes has also greatly increased. Furthermore, Foley’s character exists in the world of pro wrestling, where profit is directly driven by the ability to create heroes that the public is willing to pay to see. He must simultaneously exist as a representative of the everyday person and a mythological figure that is larger than life. Pro wrestling has produced a form of entertainment most apt to liken its athletes to mythic heroes, as wrestlers are often compared to the immortals and take on mythological names, from “Hercules” to “Adonis” to “The American Dream,” tapping into broader ideas of the mythological heroic figure (Raglan, Campbell). Iconic moments in Foley’s in-ring career become mythical images that gain meaning outside the context of the specific event: Foley’s losing an ear in Germany by having his head tied in the ropes; Foley’s bloodied battles in Japanese matches with barbed wire for ring ropes; Foley’s falling off a twenty-foot cage and later having a tooth knocked out onto his moustache in one match. These violent images become mythic icons in the overall image of Mick Foley.

However, Foley is positioned as a representative of wrestling fans as well. He uses his unconventional appearance to represent this “every man,” a term borrowed from National Public Radio reporter Steve Inskeep used to describe Foley. Mick Foley’s bodily scars embody what John Fiske describes as the grotesque in wrestling (247). Foley becomes a hero despite his

“grotesque” physical nature because of his intense love of wrestling that fans identify with and his ease at displaying his innermost thoughts and feelings. That emotion is established through Foley’s rhetoric, such as this statement in response to announcer Jim Ross’s assertion that Foley’s persona Mankind enjoys pain:

Is it when I can’t get up when my little boy says, “Daddy, I wanna play ball!” and I can’t do it? Is that when the fun starts? Is it when a doctor injects a 20-inch needle into the discs of my spine so I can wrestle one more day? Whoopee! Let the party begin. (Mick Foley).

This display of emotion and frustration is key to the audience’s identification with Foley as a spokesman for their concerns. Foley’s positioning, then, as a representative of the fans and also as a mythical figure for the fans to admire, captures one of the key contradictions of the pro wrestling figure, and Foley in particular, as hero.

The wrestling fans were instrumental in Foley’s rise to the top of the wrestling world, supporting him despite what some might consider a less-than-generous push by the wrestling narrative at some points. The night Foley won the title on Monday Night RAW, announcer Tony Schivone of the rival WCW program gave the results of the taped match away on the live Nitro, revealing that Foley would win the title. “That will put butts in seats,” he said. Figuratively speaking, it did, for, after Schivone’s announcement, several hundred thousand viewers tuned in to RAW to watch Foley, giving the WWE the ratings win for the night (The Monday Night War). Fans made Foley their hero because they both identified with and were inspired by his character. As Warren writes, “if the hero is the embodiment of our ideals . . . then to analyze him is likely to mean, in the end, an analysis of . . . ourselves” (xiv). Foley is as representative of his audience as wrestler Antonino Rocca was of New York City Puerto Rican fans in the

1950s, according to novelist/journalist Tom Wolfe, who asserted Rocca's rise as American hero as one of the strongest examples of a sports hero in contemporary culture (30).

Foley's character is also greatly shaped by the wrestling promotion that writes the narrative of his performances. The WWE, a capitalistic enterprise, promotes the heroes who can gain the most appeal from the widest audience. Therefore, while American heroes may appear self-made, they are actually the construction of hero-makers, entrepreneurs looking to use the heroic image of a character for their own profit. In Foley's case, that profit is purely monetary, as the WWE directly capitalizes on Foley's popularity through tickets and merchandising sales. The narrative of Foley's achievement, despite his constant degradation by the Mr. McMahon character, is ironic considering that the establishment the fans are rallying against in the narrative is, in reality, the promoters of Foley's character. The WWE's influence in Foley's rise as hero is similar to those of authors of more traditional fictional texts, such as those of hero-maker Horatio Alger. For instance, Alger's own obsession with money is echoed through his stories both in the pecuniary motivation of heroes and villains and in the detailed description of monetary values (Gardner 332). Similarly, Foley is not only a reflection of the WWE fans' desire and WWE's creation to capitalize on that desire but also a reflection of negotiations among the varying worldviews of the multiple authors of WWE texts. This negotiation allows Foley to exist both as a myth created for wrestling fans and as an everyday hero created by wrestling fans.

Ideology: Individualism vs. Collectivism

The narrative of Mick Foley's rise to stardom emphasizes his character's inherent desire for a cohesive community. Beginning with the nascent character development in WCW in which Foley worked as a hired gun, he has often attempted to bond with other figures, for example with fellow bounty hunter Abdullah the Butcher. His persona Mankind revealed his intense desire to

be loved by fans, only to be continually disappointed when the fans chose more attractive or more successful wrestlers over him. Foley's character's search for approval from authority figures caused him to adopt transsexual wrestler Goldust as a mother/father figure, wrestling manager Paul Bearer as "Uncle" Paul, and, later, Vince McMahon as a father figure. On a weekly basis, Foley would try to please his boss and would even call him "Dad." He also looked up to highly individualistic wrestling characters "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and, later, The Rock as big brother figures and sought approval from them by attempting to become their partner. In both cases, Foley was eventually able to win the approval of both characters, despite their lack of desire for a partner. Foley's character's commitment to a wrestling community even led to his forming a group called "The Union" at one point, a community of individual wrestlers united much like a labor union against the repressive regime of Mr. McMahon's "Corporation."

Foley's need to create a community of professional wrestlers is ironic, of course, in a narrative in which individual competition is the primary focus and in which he is able to gain respect from other wrestlers only through his individual achievements. Wrestling, and Foley's character in particular, embody this contradiction. Pro wrestling is particularly apropos for an examination of the struggle between individualism and collectivism: wrestling has a troupe of characters that is involved principally in one-on-one confrontations but that is also a group of individuals who rely on each other. The WWE is simultaneously depicted as both a tight-knit community of performers and a group all in competition with one another. Many have identified the basic plot of a pro wrestling match as centering on this contradiction. Pro wrestling heroes compete as representatives of the fans and generally attempt to compete based on rules that have been communally agreed on by the wrestlers. However, the villainous wrestler almost always

breaks that communal bond during the match behind the referee's back. As a hero, Foley balances his desire for community with the individualistic nature of his job.

Revolution: Underdog vs. Champion

Finally, Mick Foley represents one of the most troubling aspects of American culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in defining our own heroism: the paradox between our ideology being built on the toppling of the oppressive force of the ruling class by the underdog with our own country's becoming the major power in the world. As with the popular narrative of American history, Foley's rise to stardom involved a struggle through adversity. Traditionally, when the WWE groomed potential heroes for their champion position, the characters built their momentum through victories. Foley, in contrast, was brought into the company after losing several top-level matches in WCW. In the period between his WWE debut in March 1996 and his winning the title in December 1998, Foley had won only twelve of his twenty-eight WWE pay-per-view matches (2003 Wrestling Almanac 178-186). In interviews outside the WWE narrative, even Foley questioned whether his character was eligible for hero status. Foley said that when he found out he would be winning the championship, he tried to talk the WWE out of it. "I was like, 'What? Are you kidding? Me? I'm not a, you know, championship guy. I'm the guy who always, you know, comes up a little bit short'" (Inskeep).

The writers often positioned Foley as innocent, a character that Marc Leverette writes "becomes the symbol of the child in all of us" (63). Foley's narrative as the underdog builds on the rich history of the underdog athlete in professional sports and mythology (Klapp 30). As Inskeep says, "Foley hung on for years and developed a following. The more body parts he lost, the more fans he gained." Inskeep goes on to note that Foley, a Civil War buff, compares

himself to Robert E. Lee, who was “really glorious in defeat.” Foley’s tie to Lee and the South is revealing, as Warren writes that Lee became even more of a hero through failure in the Civil War myth than if the South had won the war (xxi). Likewise, as Foley lost more matches, fans began to identify with his plight and respected his dignity in defeat.

Considering Foley an underdog hero is another paradox in his narrative, however, as he is also one of the top wrestlers in the WWE. Foley’s underdog status becomes compromised by his success, just as perceptions of the United States as an underestimated nation conflicted with its rise as the major international power. One way in which American culture tends to continually perpetuate the underdog myth is through individual stories of rising through adversity. In Foley’s case, his character attempted to overcome his loss of “underdog” status by continuing to be an innocent and honest force in a corrupt system. In his return to the ring after four years away from wrestling, for instance, Foley was positioned much as Atticus Finch was in Lee Harper’s To Kill a Mockingbird. Foley, like Finch, was a man with a great reputation who only agreed to use his abilities again when there was no other choice, as Finch uses his marksman abilities only when there is no alternative left. Foley returned to the ring only after months of heckling by young wrestler Randy Orton. He had retired in 2000 after losing a retirement match and had taken a role as WWE Commissioner and occasional spokesperson. Foley forsook the big payoff and the glamour of the lights of a return because he felt he could not go back on his promise that he would retire. Foley did not return to the ring, even after being beaten and spat upon, until he felt he had no other choice but to defend his honor and family against Orton’s constant verbal assaults. This reluctance to fight and this commitment to honesty showed great restraint on Foley’s part. The writers attempted to cast Foley as an underdog in the narrative because he was a lone voice of honesty among several manipulative and opportunistic characters.

Even this re-appropriation of the underdog is undermined by Foley's superior nature as a wrestling veteran. As with Atticus Finch, the fans know of Mick Foley's power and know that he can no longer be the underdog in the ring because he has already proven his superiority by winning the championship on multiple occasions. Furthermore, Foley's guise as an innocent and honest force in the dangerous world of pro wrestling is undermined by the audience's knowledge of Foley's capacity for violence. Foley's mythology is an example of Sharon Mazer's description of wrestling's ability to dramatize the most basic violent urges repressed by socialization ("The Doggie Doggie World" 97). Through his reputation as Cactus Jack and Mankind, Foley is perhaps the most violent wrestler to ever come through the WWE. Sociologist Gregory Stone posits that these contradictions are key components of all pro wrestling texts because the wrestling hero is depicted as someone who wants to overcome the uncompetitive spectacular element of a sport that is corrupting true competition but is, in reality, a part of that spectacle as well (59). This irony is very much at the heart of the current ambivalence regarding the depiction of the traditional masculine American hero and is particularly appropriate when using Foley as a case study.

Conclusion: Implications for Future Research

Pro wrestling is an appropriate avenue for researching broader themes in American culture because wrestling allows its fans a close involvement in writing and defining the text. Through the instant feedback available in wrestling shows, fans can directly influence the pacing of a show and can rewrite its meaning. Those viewing televised wrestling can mediate its meaning through their own interpretation of wrestling's often ambiguous messages and through their viewing patterns, around which the shows are written. Promoters and performers alter their

fictional characters to change the character's meaning, similar to how musicians such as Prince, Pat Boone, and David Bowie "redefine" themselves for a new generation. Meanwhile, fans alter fictional characters through their perceptions and interpretations, similar to the ways that another liminal star, Elvis Presley, has been appropriated to represent a variety of American values.

Pro wrestling is even more directly involved than other forms of mass entertainment in these negotiations of meaning in its relationship with fans. Because it is more communally defined than most other contemporary constructions, pro wrestling shows are particularly rewarding texts in which to study the ways in which its characters and narratives reflect values and conflicts in American culture, as this case study of Foley has demonstrated. Pro wrestling is capable of instantly recording shifts in American values because of this communal authorship. The myriad readings of wrestling make it open to interpretation from a variety of critical perspectives: literary, cultural, sociological, anthropological, folk studies, performance studies, communication studies, myth criticism, and Marxism. Wrestling is one of many underutilized angles through which to examine broader issues in contemporary and historic American culture and a genre in which growing critical interest has only further demonstrated wrestling's future potential for interdisciplinary study.

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Vince McMahon: Creating a Synergistic Pro Wrestling Media Empire

The professional wrestling industry has emerged at the beginning of the 21st century as a \$1 billion synergistic multimedia empire controlled by one visionary, Vince McMahon, and his company, World Wrestling Entertainment.¹ McMahon's media wrestling monopoly will continue to have a major impact on the entertainment industry in the wake of one of the most turbulent decades of change in the history of American wrestling, the 1990s. His continued success has come, in part, from the WWE making its product available in multiple media forms, so that, even when the total number of consumers of the WWE product falls, the company finds a variety of ways to get the remaining audience to purchase its entertainment.

Pro wrestling and television have matured together, with wrestling airing on all four major networks during television's infancy and being syndicated on local affiliates across the country in the 1960s and 1970s. The tag team of wrestling and cable television solidified in the 1980s and 1990s. WWE was the most consistently popular show on cable at many points, as the industry continued on its road to eventual conglomeration in the hands of Vince McMahon. If

¹ John Leland, Daniel Pederson, and Elizabeth Angell, "Stone Cold Crazy," *Newsweek* 132.21, 23 November 1998, 60-64.

McMahon's wrestling empire grew through his relationship with cable television, the wrestling product's dissemination in multiple media forms has been instrumental in the company's now being the only major wrestling enterprise in America. The media forms that the WWE currently uses include books, magazines, compact discs, the Internet, WWE Films, and video and DVD sales. Such synergy has allowed the WWE to form a monopoly over the wrestling business. World Wrestling Entertainment serves as a textbook example of the power of media synergy and as a tool for assessing the benefits and problems associated with that power.

Synergy in the media involves a product being marketed in multiple media forms and often involves cooperation among several media entities or, in an increasingly conglomerated mass media industry, complementary departments within an umbrella company that work together but with each specializing in a particular media form. In his 1998 article in *American Journalism Review*, media analyst Ken Auletta defines *synergy* using the media model of the Tribune Company, where that one company distributes the same content through multiple television outlets, “‘extends its brand’ by appearing in different media,” uses a sports team to help recreate one of its television networks, airs movies from WB through its television network, etc. Auletta concludes that “synergy has its limits, but at Tribune they’re not business limits.”² Vince McMahon's WWE empire is much different in nature from the Tribune Company, as it is completely in the entertainment industry. The WWE presents a more focused—and therefore a more salient—example of media synergy. Since McMahon's empire revolves solely around his wrestling product, questions that Auletta and others face—such as a loss of journalistic integrity in media conglomerates—are not a concern here. Rather, this essay examines the effects that McMahon's media control and synergistic operations have on the marketing of his product.

² Ken Auletta. “Synergy City.” *American Journalism Review*, May 1998, Issue 267. Online version. <<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp=3273>>.

Examining the rise of the WWE over the past 20 years is a crucial step in understanding its current role in various mass media and in providing background on the ways the company created its media synergy. By marrying its live events with television to a degree never before accomplished by a wrestling company and by constantly expanding its brand into other media forms, the WWE has gradually positioned itself into the synergistic power that it is today, moving from a regional business in the Northeast to becoming a worldwide entertainment conglomerate. The WWE's use of media synergy, in combination with cuts in the corporate infrastructure, has led to this past fiscal year being one of the WWE's most profitable, even with its smaller audience.³

The Initial Rise: Rock 'N Wrestling

When television networks first began, professional wrestling was a staple. Semiotics scholar Roland Barthes writes that professional wrestling is a “spectacle of excess” that is visual in nature and “demands an immediate reading.”⁴ While Barthes is considering a live wrestling event, this visual nature of sports entertainment was an important selling point in the early days of television. Morton and O'Brien claim that wrestling had suffered during the days of radio because recording only sound “was unkind to wrestling which is basically visual.”⁵ However, the authors find that television captured wrestling's drama perfectly, as the large stars filled the television screens. “With the advent of television—the medium of the moment, the visual, the spectacle—wrestling came into the mainstream of American popular culture.”⁶ They note that neighborhoods would often gather for “the communal experience of an evening of TV

³ WWE CorpBiz. <<http://corporate.wwe.com>>. Accessed 29 September 2004.

⁴ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” *Mythologies*, Trans. Annette Levers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, 15-25. 15-16. Book written by Barthes in 1957 in French.

⁵ Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

wrestling.”⁷ Professional wrestling grew in popularity, and, with it, the wrestlers became stars themselves. Most prominent among them was the effeminate Gorgeous George, whose stardom many claimed sold television sets. Forest Steven Beverly likens George to Milton Berle in his ability to sell the television, noting that “some theorists believe Berle’s comic sketches in female dress were partially borrowed from George.”⁸ Beverly says that wrestling was believed to have “expedited the sale of television sets” across the country.⁹ Beverly also considers the role of the wrestling announcer as “part traffic cop, part storyteller, part devil’s advocate, part prosecutor, and a large measure of father figure and chief counselor for the viewer when villainry [sic] succeeds,” pointing out that the viewer’s identification with the announcer was an early draw to wrestling as a pseudo-sport full of theatrics.¹⁰ Another explanation for the early popularity of wrestling was that the display of men’s bodies and the drama involved in the show drew a much more significant female audience than most sports, attracting many advertisers.¹¹

Wrestling appeared first on both the DuMont Network and ABC and was a major part of DuMont’s programming schedule.¹² By the mid-1950s, wrestling had been organized as a group of territories, with each group getting television time with local affiliates throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During the late 1970s, Vincent K. McMahon began working for his father, Vincent J. McMahon, who owned Capital Wrestling. Capital Wrestling was the parent company of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), which ran shows “from Virginia to Maine,” including New

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Forest Steven Beverly, *A History of Professional Wrestling as Television Programming Form: 1941-1989*, Master’s thesis, Auburn University, 1989, 37.

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ See Chad Edward Dell, *Researching Historical Broadcast Audiences: Female Fandom of Professional Wrestling, 1945-1960*, Dissertation, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1997, and Chad Dell, “Lookit That Hunk of Man!’: Subversive Pleasures, Female Fandom, and Professional Wrestling,” *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, Ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton P., 1998, 87-108.

¹² Jeff Neal-Lunsford, “Sport in the Land of Television: The Use of Sport in Network Prime-Time Schedules 1946-1950,” *Journal of Popular History* 19.1, 67-68.

York City, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, and other major East Coast cities.¹³ Television provincialism benefited wrestling because each promoter ran his arena shows in regional areas, and the regional television program served as an hour-long commercial every week for the arena shows. Television was simply used as a tool to promote the live event, which was the real moneymaker for the promoters. Eventually, Vince Jr. and wife Linda bought out his father and his father's partners with four payments of \$250,000 each.¹⁴

McMahon's plan was to take advantage of the nascent cable television market and turn his wrestling region into a national market. In 1984, McMahon replaced the wrestling programming on the USA Network and Ted Turner's TBS with his WWF television shows, thereby gaining him slots on two of the top cable networks of the time period.¹⁵ The cable medium was important for this growth because the early cable industry was looking for inexpensive programming to fill up its broadcast week, and wrestling cost less than a television series that they would have had to develop and tape in-studio. Because the cable medium was growing in popularity as McMahon attempted his national expansion, his use of cable television provided a chance for both to grow together.

¹³ John Leland, "Why America's Hooked on Wrestling," *Newsweek* 135.6, 47. Vincent K. McMahon was raised by his mother in rural North Carolina and did not know his father until the age of twelve, when Vince Jr. became interested in the wrestling promotion his father ran. The WWE was known as the WWF until a lawsuit with the World Wildlife Fund in 2002. This paper will use WWF when referring specifically to the period that the WWE used that name, and will use WWE when referring to the entity as a whole or the current product.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁵ Shaun Assael and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002): 36-38. Also view comments by wrestling announcer Gene Oakerlund, *Monday Night Wars*, WWE Entertainment, 2004. Ted Turner, when he first took over TBS in the early 1970s, achieved ratings success through running re-runs of popular programs and through *Georgia Championship Wrestling*, which he ran on Saturday nights. Because of this success, Turner felt an allegiance to professional wrestling, to the point that he would later own his own wrestling company. McMahon had to spend \$900,000 to buy out ninety percent of the Georgia territory to get the TBS slot.

Eventually, McMahon's relationship with Turner soured, with the regional Mid-South wrestling show on TBS outperforming WWF in ratings. McMahon sold his TBS time slot to Jim Crockett's NWA. The NWA and the WWF then competed for the next several years. Both expanded their operations to pay-per-view (PPV) television. PPV became an important part of the wrestling industry because it gave the television show a purpose and provided an event that the fans could feel was more important than the weekly wrestling show. In the days of territory wrestling, fans would watch the television show to see which matches would be set up for the weekend's live event in the arena. Because the WWF was now touring nationwide, this idea of the arena show as the culmination did not work for major feuds on a national base. McMahon realized through his early closed circuit and PPV events that he could draw fans from around the country through a few PPV super-events every year. By doing this, he could capitalize on his growing fan base already watching his television and attending his live events by providing another way for fans to consume his product. Eventually, these super-events became so popular that they became one of the main sources for company revenue.

With the drawing power of personalities like Hulk Hogan, Randy Savage, and Roddy Piper for the WWF, McMahon pulled away from Crockett's promotion in the competition. The two companies had been competing on both cable television and pay-per-view, often setting shows up on free television to correspond with the other brand's pay-per-view, hoping to diminish the buys for the other company's show. McMahon even scheduled a pay-per-view event the same night as one of Crockett's events, forcing cable companies to choose between the two. Eventually, though, it was the WWF's effective marketing to children, primarily through Hulk Hogan, that helped McMahon to pull away from Crockett, coupled with disorganization within the creative team of Crockett's promotion, with wrestlers often appearing as on-screen talent and also writers for the show.

McMahon extended his television schedule to include, for a time, a Tuesday night wrestling show called *Tuesday Night Titans*, which supplemented wrestling matches with interviews in a set reminiscent of Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* and with comedy skits involving the wrestling personalities. The show rarely contained actual wrestling content. McMahon also marketed *Saturday Night's Main Event*, a wrestling show that replaced *Saturday Night Live* once a month on the NBC network and highlighted wrestling's return to network television for the first time since the early 1950s. McMahon created his own wrestling magazine, *WWF Magazine*, to follow his stars and cross-promoted his wrestlers through trading cards, video games, records, home video, wrestling toys, and films. He also places his stars into other television shows, such as *The A-Team*. Such marketing a precursor to the current synergistic operation of the WWE. These early examples of synergy for the WWF helped McMahon distinguish his product from Crockett's. Eventually, McMahon won the war between the two companies, and Crockett sold his promotion to Ted Turner.

WWF vs. WCW

According to wrestling folklore, Turner had called McMahon close to the end of 1988 and proclaimed, "Guess what, Vince! I'm in the 'rasslin business!'"¹⁶ He eventually turned Crockett's NWA program into WCW, World Championship Wrestling. The two organizations competed but with little success for WCW. Business was down from the 1980s on both sides because of an overexposed product and a lack of marketable stars such as Hulk Hogan. There were also a variety of poor decisions at a managerial level in both companies.

The WWF and WCW were losing their audience on television and at live events. Their plight was then exacerbated when federal investigators charged McMahon with steroid

¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

distribution, and McMahon went to trial in 1994. Although he was eventually acquitted, the WWF lost much of its momentum. McMahon had also been weakened by his inability to successfully extend his success into other media—his late 1980s film *No Holds Barred*, starring WWF Champion Hulk Hogan, flopped. McMahon had invested \$20 million in the project.¹⁷ Later, his World Bodybuilding Federation lacked fan interest because the wrestling audience did not necessarily cross over with an interest in bodybuilding. Also, the debut of the bodybuilding promotion coincided with the steroid investigation, which caused further controversy for McMahon.¹⁸ McMahon's focus on the trial diverted his energy from wrestling and temporarily forced him to institute steroid testing.¹⁹ The steroid testing was expensive, in that it caused McMahon to decide to clear out many of his long-time top stars and focus on new and unproven, generally smaller wrestlers, to carry his programming. Meanwhile, Turner was not able to capitalize on McMahon's loss of momentum, as his company went through a series of managers to oversee WCW, with a consistent overturn in leadership becoming typical when a manager was not able to make the company profitable through live event attendance in a certain amount of time.

Monday Night Wars

Monday night television programming had been a staple for the WWF since McMahon began promoting *Prime Time Wrestling* on Monday nights. However, in 1993, he shaved the show down to one hour and renamed it *Monday Night RAW*, a first-run, sometimes live, wrestling show that featured his top stars. The show was a success, at least successful in terms of the early 1990s, which was down from the 1980s high. Meanwhile, Ted Turner appointed Eric Bischoff as the new manager of WCW. Bischoff, who also worked on-air as an announcer,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

secured the funding from Turner to hire former WWF stars such as Hulk Hogan, Randy “Macho Man” Savage, and a long list of 1980s WWF talents. In 1995, Turner decided to create a Monday night show to compete with McMahon’s *RAW* program. The show would go head-to-head with McMahon’s show on cable, with Turner debuting *Nitro* on his TNT network and McMahon with *RAW* on USA. Turner marketed both his stars and former WCW stars, as well as newly created stars such as Bill Goldberg. McMahon, meanwhile, created new stars in Steve Austin, Mick Foley, The Rock, and Triple H to create a “new generation” of the WWF to compete with Turner.²⁰ While Turner’s show initially thrashed the WWF in the ratings, by 1998, the two shows competed regularly for viewers. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, the WWF and WCW produced fifteen hours of weekly television programming that attracted thirty-five million viewers in the late 1990s.²¹ Both shows thrived, with WCW orchestrating a mock-takeover by ex-WWF stars called the New World Order (nWo), while WWF chronicled the rise of working-man anti-hero “Stone Cold” Steve Austin against tyrannical boss Mr. McMahon. The two-hour *RAW* and *Nitro* programs regularly finished as the top four cable programming hours of the week. A chart of television viewing shares of cable television from 1985 to 1999 provided in *Monthly Labor Review* shows an interesting correlation between pro wrestling’s popularity and the growth of cable television. In 1985, cable television had just above ten percent of television viewing shares. From 1986 until the beginning of 1991, that number grew annually to about twenty-five percent of the television viewing shares. This coincides with the first wrestling boom, which began in 1985 and ran throughout the late 1980s before wrestling tapered off in the early 1990s. Interestingly, cable television share growth also flattened, with the industry showing little growth from 1991 until 1995. From 1995 until 1996, the television

²⁰ This information comes from comments by the longest-serving WCW manager, Eric Bischoff, on the *Monday Night War* DVD.

²¹ Lynn Rosellini, “Lords of the Ring,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 126.19, 17 May 1999, 52-58.

viewing shares for cable took their most dramatic viewing leap from twenty-five percent to close to thirty-five percent, coinciding with the beginning of the Monday Night War. As wrestling hit its second boom period in 1998 and 1999, cable television shares had grown to over forty percent.²² This is not to suggest that pro wrestling is the cause for these growth periods but merely to note that wrestling's success periods correlate with the periods of growth for the cable industry to which it has been so closely tied.

When the WWF made cable television and pay-per-view events the complete focus of the company's promotion, the company experienced a zenith of popularity. Scholars have struggled to understand wrestling's latest growth period, with many trends instead focusing on potential negative media effects and stereotypes in the entertainment form. Aaron Feigenbaum examines, in detail, the rise of Steve Austin as a working-class hero and sees him as one of the major forces in wrestling's growth in popularity. He concludes that Austin represents an anti-hegemonic force battling against the tyrannical Mr. McMahon, played by Vince McMahon himself.²³ Dalbir Singh Sehmbly believes that wrestling promoters find effective ways to tap into American myths and likens the building of a hero in wrestling both to Horatio Alger stories and dime novels.²⁴ Sociologist Brendon Maguire, who has studied professional wrestling for many years, believes that wrestling's late-1990s boom centered around "three allures that stand out: excitement, intrigue, and political incorrectness" and notes that these are representative of three macro forces in American society: "community breakdown, social disenchantment, and political correctness."²⁵ While scholars are at odds about what caused the growth in pro wrestling's

²² Dominic Toto, "Job Growth in Television: Cable Versus Broadcast, 1958-1999," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 2000, 3-14.

²³ Aaron D. Feigenbaum, *Professional Wrestling, Sports Entertainment and the Liminal Experience in American Culture*. Dissertation, University of Florida, 2000.

²⁴ Dalbir Singh Sehmbly, *Professional Wrestling, Whooo! A Cultural Con, An Athletic Dramatic Narrative, and a Haven for Rebel Heroes*. University of Alberta, Master's thesis, 2000.

²⁵ Brendan Maguire, "American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Current Content, and

popularity, the late 1990s boom became wrestling's most watched period, although brief, with major viewer interest in the Monday night cable television ratings war between the two wrestling companies. Previously, especially when pro wrestling television shows were localized and aired only in the region where a group of wrestlers toured regularly, television was used to promote live events. By the late 1990s, however, according to professional wrestling analyst Dave Meltzer, live events had moved to a distant third on the list of revenue sources for wrestling companies, behind television ratings and advertising rates, as well as PPV buys, the most important revenue stream.²⁶ For instance, from figures recently released about WWE revenues for August 2004, the average gate for house shows for the month was \$142,780. Conversely, the month's pay-per-view event, Summerslam, received not only a million-dollar live gate but also an early estimate of \$5.63 million in pay-per-view revenue, a number likely to expand once the buys actually come in.²⁷ In addition, these PPV events can be released on DVDs and videos and through Internet streaming video. Although wrestling's ad rates are low compared to their ratings success, likely because of the longtime prejudices against wrestling fans, the WWE has multi-million dollar deals today, which substantially drive up the ratings averages for both networks that the programming airs on. Also, WWE seeks special endorsement deals for several products, including Stacker II. The company also has monthly sponsors for its PPV events.

Slowly, the landscape of the business began to change because of McMahon's success in media synergy. With the rise of his *Monday Nitro* program, Turner and his WCW had created the initial stage of the wrestling boom. However, after Turner had quashed McMahon, the WWF promotional machine created a number of new characters that became marketable in synergistic attempts at cross promotion. For instance, wrestler The Rock became a Hollywood star with the

Popular Appeal," Forthcoming, *Sociological Spectrum*, (2005).

²⁶ Dave Meltzer, personal telephone interview with the author, 27 March 2002. Dave Meltzer writes the weekly *Wrestling Observer* newsletter that is distributed internationally.

²⁷ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 20 September 2004, 8.

Mummy films, while Mick Foley became a best-selling author on the *New York Times* non-fiction list, and “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and other wrestlers became mainstream stars, appearing on other television shows from game shows to *Nash Bridges* and *Pacific Blue*.

Turner expanded *Nitro* to three hours, began a two-hour Thursday *Thunder* program on TBS, and continued broadcasting *WCW Saturday Night* and his syndicated wrestling shows. WWF began *Sunday Night Heat* on the USA Network and struck a deal with UPN to air *WWF Smackdown* on the network head-to-head with Turner’s *Thunder*. This came in addition to WWF’s Saturday morning and Sunday morning review shows as well as forays into Hispanic programming with *Los Super Astros*, a show featuring chiefly Hispanic wrestlers. The main drive behind WWF’s success, though, was a switch from focusing on the pre-teen demographic to the adolescent and young adult male demographics. This led to more risqué programming, an increased use of foul language, and a stronger emphasis on class struggles in major storylines. In this way, wrestling followed a larger trend in American television toward testing its boundaries regarding controversial content. Also, the young adult males of the late 1990s constituted the same generation that had been Vince McMahon’s kids group of the late 1980s. McMahon was able to reach his old audience once again by engaging them with content more appropriate to their age group. In short, McMahon “grew up” alongside his audience. On WWF programming in 1997, McMahon came on television to announce that the WWF was no longer about “good guy versus bad guy” and that “the hero that tells you to say your prayers and take your vitamins is passé,” reaching out to his audience to tell them the wrestling world was, in some way, growing up.²⁸ This switch in demographic was aided greatly by compelling serial drama that kept audiences coming back for the weekly narrative. WWF slipped away from

²⁸ Segment played on various WWF Television Programming, late 1997.

WCW in the ratings war by the end of 1998. With their company down, WCW executives were continually fired in attempts to turn business around for the company.²⁹

The Road to Conglomeration

McMahon strengthened his grip on the wrestling industry in 2000, making efforts which led to the eventual conglomeration of American wrestling. The result of McMahon's successful moves during wrestling's boom period—the increased marketing of his stars outside of the wrestling television and arena show package and the compelling serial drama that engendered a phenomenal television audience—saw Turner's WCW weakened by 2000 to the point that it provided no real competition for McMahon. McMahon himself made his product more conservative, eliminating the frequency of scenes shot just to “push the envelope” of sexual and religious mores, to keep from losing advertisers after the Parents Television Council campaigned against WWF “indecent,” and stories of WWF's risqué programming caused a loss in advertising.³⁰ This larger trend of self-censorship in the media in the past few years has been led by both conservative voices, attacking what they see as the plethora of violence and language on television, and liberal voices, condemning a myriad of what they perceive as cultural stereotypes that misrepresent minority groups on television. Some of this conservatism has become internalized, as the WWE does not want groups like the PTC attacking their sponsors and likewise do not want to disobey FCC regulations with its *Smackdown* show. These pressures have led the WWE to pursue an image of risqué programming while avoiding the production of many scenes that would actually be that shocking in today's television culture.

²⁹ Assael, 230.

³⁰ Kathleen S. Lowney, “Wrestling with Criticism: The World Wrestling Federation's Ironic Campaign against the Parents Television Council,” *Symbolic Interaction* 26.3 (2003), 427-446. Lowney documents the WWE's war with the PTC and its use of parody through some of its wrestling characters to gain some degree of revenge on the council.

Still at the apex of popularity, McMahon's WWF soon struck a deal with media giant Viacom.³¹ After negotiating between its long-time home on cable television, the USA Network, and Viacom in mid-2000, WWF programming moved to its new home on Viacom's MTV and TNN. Eventually, the WWF's *Sunday Night Heat* program moved from MTV to TNN as well. McMahon's company was also launching public stock and breaking into other ventures, such as the WWE Films Division, the ill-fated XFL Football League and WWE New York Restaurant on Times Square, as well as WWE CD releases.

Then, wrestling programming began to lose fans.³² Interest may have faded due to the excess of weekly TV programming between WWF, WCW, and Paul Heyman's independent group, Extreme Championship Wrestling, which had gotten a short-term spot on TNN at one point. All three groups produced PPVs, with sometimes as many as three major PPVs in a month. Or the popularity may have faded with the 1999 injury of Steve Austin, The Rock's increasing Hollywood schedule, Mick Foley's retirement at the beginning of 2000, and a shortage of superstars. Most likely, with fading competition and the elimination of that competition by 2001, the WWF was also suffering from a creative drain. The more conservative climate in television may have led some fans to believe the current wrestling product was a watered-down version of the show of the late-1990s. By any estimation, the cyclical fluctuation of wrestling popularity usually cited to describe wrestling's gaining and losing popularity as a fad is much too simplistic to provide a proper explanation, and the loss of popularity for wrestling in the early part of the new millennium was a combination of all of these factors, as well as others.

³¹ Assael, 237.

³² Mark Ginocchio, "WWE: Smacked Down, But Getting Up Again," *The Stamford Advocate*, 28 December 2003.

McMahon bought the rights to the bankrupt ECW because the group had sustained an underground credibility with fans but did not have the financial backing to stay afloat. Heyman had regional success and, thanks to tape traders, parlayed his product into a nationally syndicated show and a short-lived spot on TNN. However, the costs of maintaining a national promotion were too much for his small company. McMahon hired many of its performers, including its owner Paul Heyman, to work for him, and acquired the tape library of the promotion.

Meanwhile, Time-Warner, which had bought all of Ted Turner's television programming, decided to sell the wrestling business to McMahon, because, unlike Turner, the executives at Time-Warner did not have an attachment to the wrestling business and did not want to invest the energy required to make their wrestling company successful.³³ By mid-2001, with wrestling ratings falling and interest declining, Vince McMahon, humbled by the demise of his XFL Football League, was the sole owner of major pro wrestling in America.

Wrestling's 21st Century Outlook

Today, the WWE (with name changed after the lawsuit with World Wildlife Fund) has one of the highest rated weekly programs on the UPN network—*WWE Smackdown*—with only *America's Next Top Model* as competition on the network. Although interest has declined from its peak years, *Smackdown* is still the ratings mainstay of the UPN Network, regularly the lowest rated of the six American networks. *Smackdown* usually ranks fourth of the six network offerings for its Thursday time slot, competing against such tough shows as the Thursday sit-com lineup on NBC and *CSI* on CBS. TNN has changed its name to Spike TV, "The First Network for Men." Its *WWE RAW* is the top-rated show and focal point, with only reruns of *CSI* coming close to *RAW*'s numbers for the network. *RAW* remains one of the highest rated regular series on

³³ Ibid., 250-252.

cable television. In September 2005, however, the WWE will be returning to the USA Network, leaving *Spike TV* after being its focal programming for the past five years.³⁴

The WWE has begun what is called the “brand extension” by enlisting former WCW and ECW wrestlers and stars created from its talent development program through Ohio Valley Wrestling in Louisville. With the added workers, the organization is able to create two separate rosters of stars. The term “brand extension” comes from the public relations jargon used to describe synergistic activity. As Auletta notes, the cross-promotion of Tribune Companies in each other’s media is an example not only of convergence but of “brand extension.”³⁵ One roster competes on *RAW* and *Sunday Night Heat* on Spike TV, while the other roster competes on *Smackdown* on UPN and *Velocity* on Spike TV on Saturday nights. The WWE has increased its pay-per-view schedule to about fifteen shows a year, with only four of those shows featuring wrestlers from both rosters and the others being “brand-specific” for either *RAW* talent or *Smackdown* talent. The purpose of this division is to emulate the feeling of competition amongst promotions that the WWE once had with WCW and to keep its stars from suffering from overexposure through all the WWE TV shows. In addition to its talent development program through Ohio Valley Wrestling, the WWE has also begun a similar minor league in Atlanta and is considering adding more independent promoters to act as trainers for potential stars. The WWE also has a Sunday morning show, *WWE Experience*, and syndicated shows such as *WWE Bottom Line* that recap footage from the first-run programming.

WWE ratings have remained fairly consistent now that the company is down to its core fan base. The growth period of the late 1990s and 2000 added legions of casual fans, but those fans were not deeply involved in the stories and tended to have much shorter attention spans for

³⁴ Dave Meltzer. *Wrestling Observer*, 21 March 2005, 1.

³⁵ Auletta, *AJR*.

the product if the stories become stale in any way.³⁶ The current fan base is not necessarily the same fans from before the late-1990s boom.

WWE as Synergistic Empire

With the WWE down to its most ardent fans, its current financial successes have come through marketing that product in various media forms. This synergistic activity through the WWE has allowed the company to maximize profitability even with a decline in the total number of fans. Television remains the most important aspect of the WWE's business. The WWE now produces five hours of weekly programming for *Spike TV*, four hours of which is first-run programming; two hours of first-run programming for UPN; and two hours of syndicated programming, in addition to at least one pay-per-view event per month that generates well over a hundred thousand buys, all at \$34.95 each. These programs are the centerpiece of all the WWE's activities and the chief agent through which to advance storylines and character development.

The WWE magazine division split into two magazines in 1996, *RAW Magazine* and *WWF Magazine*. Today, those two magazines are *RAW Magazine* and *Smackdown Magazine*, both producing monthly issues that supplement the on-air storylines and also provide features about past wrestling stars and their current whereabouts. The magazine division, which has run since the beginning of the WWE's national expansion, is suffering from a decline in popularity but still remains a staple part of the permeation of WWE's product, appearing on magazine

³⁶ Ginocchio. Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 26 April 2004, 5. While WWE ratings for the late-1990s were often in the 6.0 to 7.0 range, current WWE ratings are in the mid-3's for *RAW* and the lower 3's for *Smackdown*, although *Smackdown*'s audience is actually bigger because it is on network television. These numbers are based on Nielson research mentioned as part of Mark Ginocchio's late 2003 *Stamford Advocate* story. In March 2004, the rating for the *RAW* show was up 5.9 percent as compared to March 2003, while the *Smackdown* rating has risen 8.2 percent, now at 3.30. The summer has recorded slight drops, but the WWE's popularity has remained consistent with its core fan base.

stands across the country. The WWE has also continued with its marketing of logo T-shirts and a myriad of action figures and other merchandise for fans to collect. Merchandising, especially T-shirt sales, have become an important revenue stream through the WWE live events, and the merchandise is usually promoted throughout the television programming. This synergistic cross-promotion includes every media outlet the company uses, as television promotes live event dates, merchandise, and magazines, and the magazines promote the merchandise, live events, and television, etc.

While the WWE used to market its videos through Coliseum Home Video, beginning in the 1980s, it now has its own home video distribution, with tremendous growth in its DVD section. The WWE DVD division markets DVDs from its expansive tape library of wrestling. The DVDs are often among the top-selling sports DVDs of the year. The DVD market promises to be one of the WWE's biggest opportunities for expansion, and the WWE currently plans to release fewer DVDs a year with a greater degree of hype for each release. The company releases DVDs of all its PPV shows, as well as personality features, "best of" features from its television shows, and is now making extensive use of its growing archival collection through "best of" DVDs of various performers.³⁷ The marketing of DVDs increases the potential that dedicated fans might purchase an event on PPV and also purchase the DVD of the event once it is released a few months later. The WWE has capitalized on its mounds of footage by finding new ways for fans to purchase it and have for their own archival collections. Such promotion not only becomes another revenue stream for the WWE but also encourages fans to become even more involved in their relationship with the wrestling product by collecting all the past events and personally owning the footage.

³⁷ The WWE's best-selling DVDs have been *The Ric Flair Collection*, *The Monday Night War*, *Wrestlemania XX*, and *The Rise and Fall of ECW*, all WWE Home Video productions released in 2003 and 2004. The WWE has also had success with offerings such as *Hard Knocks: The Chris Benoit Story*, *Cheating Death*, *Stealing Life: Eddie Guerrero*, and the *WWE 2004 Hall of Fame*.

The WWE first released an album with its 1985 *The Wrestling Album*. However, the tradition has grown into an annual CD release which has included everything from anthologies of wrestlers' entrance themes to their personal song recordings. These CDs often appear close to the top of the CD sales lists during the first couple of weeks of release, despite negative reviews by critics and a complete lack of radio play time. Again, the WWE promotes this music extensively on their own programming, and the products become another way for ardent fans to prove their loyalty and involvement.

The WWE's first video games came out in the mid-1980s with Nintendo. The company currently develops products for gaming systems such as Game Cube and Playstation with its recent releases, such as *Day of Reckoning*. The WWE releases a couple of video games a year, featuring its top current and former wrestling personalities.³⁸ The fans' fantasy involvement with the wrestlers is heightened through the video game experience, which gives fans the chance not only to collect merchandise of the characters but to actually "be" the characters and compete with the other wrestling stars.

McMahon is even having some success in film. After his 1980s failure with *No Holds Barred*, he took a decade break from Hollywood before having success with wrestler Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Under contract to McMahon until recently, Johnson has starred in several Hollywood productions. Because Johnson has been under contract to McMahon and because WWE becomes a promotional tool for The Rock's films, McMahon is listed as executive producer on all of Rock's films and receives about \$1 million in revenue for each film because Rock is still a contracted WWE performer. The films include *Mummy Returns*, *The Scorpion*

³⁸ *Day of Reckoning* has its own Web site at <<http://www.dayofreckoninggame.com/>>. The game is a prominent part of advertising on WWE's weekly television broadcasts.

King, The Rundown, and Walking Tall.³⁹ McMahon has also created WWE Films and markets works featuring his performers in starring roles, some in the straight-to-video format.⁴⁰ The first of their productions was a documentary on the making of the 2003 version of the major WWE show of the year, *Wrestlemania*, which aired in March 2004 on UPN.⁴¹ Also, a WWE documentary on wrestler Eddie Guerrero's battling drug addiction—entitled *Cheating Death, Stealing Life*—aired on UPN and was released as part of a DVD set about Guerrero's career.⁴² WWE Films is now working with film distribution companies on a string of films starring WWE personalities such as “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, John Cena, and Kane.

The new media division began in the 1990s with the WWE AOL site and expanded into WWE.com, which has become a major marketing tool, corporate policy tool, and disseminator of

³⁹ “Exhibitor Relations’s Top 50 Movies of 2002,” Info Please Web site, <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipea/A0300775.html>>, Accessed 01 May 2004. Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 3 May 2004, 15. “Rock,” Rotten Tomatoes Web site, <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/p/Rock-1128210/news.php>>, Accessed 01 May 2004. “*The Rundown*,” Box Office Mojo Web site, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekend&id=rundown.htm>>, Accessed 01 May 2004. “*The Scorpion King*,” Box Office Mojo Web site, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scorpionking.htm>>, Accessed 01 May 2004. The *Scorpion King* grossed over \$90 million in U.S. theaters, the 29th top-grossing film of that year. The film grossed about \$74 million internationally. *The Scorpion King*, Rock’s debut in a lead role, also did well on video and DVD release. The Rock had a supporting role in *The Mummy Returns* in 2000. *The Rundown* grossed over \$47 million in the U.S. and \$32 million in international releases and also has done well in the video and DVD market. Currently, *Walking Tall* has averaged about \$46 million at the domestic box office, \$47 million at the international box office, and has done well in the video and DVD market. The Rock is already confirmed to star in *Doom, Spy Hunter, Gridiron Gang, Johnny Bravo, and Instant Karma*, and has expressed interest in starring in a film biography of the life of Hawaiian King Kamehameha the Great and in the film *Silver Surfer*. He also has a supporting role in the 2005 release *Be Cool*, the sequel to *Get Shorty*. Johnson’s contract with McMahon ended at the end of 2004, but the two remain in contact and the potential for Rock to sign a new deal with the WWE remains fairly strong.

⁴⁰ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 3 May 2004, 17. WWE is currently planning on marketing two films, starring wrestlers such as John Cena, HHH, and Kane. The HHH film is being discussed for theatrical release, while the Kane film will likely be straight-to-video.

⁴¹ *The Mania of Wrestlemania*, WWE Films, 2004. Aired 12 March 2004 on UPN. Narrated by Jesse Ventura. Also included on multiple disc set of *Wrestlemania XX*, a 2004 WWE DVD release.

⁴² *Eddie Guerrero: Cheating Death, Stealing Life*. WWE Home Video. Released 28 September 2004.

storyline information.⁴³ The site includes news stories from WWE staff, photo galleries, arena schedules, television schedules and previews/reviews, personality profiles, corporate news, streaming capabilities for WWE PPV, and a weekly WWE call-in show, *Byte This!* The WWE has also recently created an online gaming forum—similar to fantasy football leagues—that allows for players to design their own rosters using WWE characters.⁴⁴ The league provides an even more involved way for fans to increase their fantasy role-playing involvement with wrestling, as fans compete with each other in a chance to “own” the wrestling rosters and make matches themselves. The competition has been successful so far and has already gone through a few “seasons,” with the winners being featured on the WWE web site.

Although in the past the WWE released a few children’s picture books, its book division has grown through deals with ReganBooks and now with Pocket Books. The success of its 1999 release of Mick Foley’s *Have a Nice Day* has led to an annual flow of books, many of which have great success as non-fiction memoir writing. Some of these offerings have either been or have been close to bestsellers, creating a new niche market for wrestling books and subsequently opening the market for non-WWE books as well. Authored by WWE performers, these books have included memoirs of current and past stars, media criticism, financial advice, and bodybuilding tips. The WWE has also marketed cookbooks, children’s books, trivia books, and coffee table books.⁴⁵ These books allow WWE performers to export their marketable

⁴³ WWE Web site. <<http://www.wwe.com>>

⁴⁴ WWE Salary Cap Fantasy Game. <<http://fantasy.wwe.com/>>.

⁴⁵ Kurt Angle and John Harper, *It’s True! It’s True!* New York: ReganBooks, 2001; Steve Austin, Jim Ross and Dennis Brent, *The Stone Cold Truth*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Fred Blassie and Keith Elliot Greenberg, *Listen, You Pencil Neck Geeks*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Robert Caprio, *Are We There Yet?: Tales from the Never-Ending Travels of WWE Superstars*, New York: Pocket Books, 2005; Adam Copeland, *Adam Copeland on Edge*, New York: Pocket Books, 2005; Basil V. DeVito, *Wrestlemania: The Official Insider’s Story*, New York: ReganBooks, 2001; Amy Dumas and Michael Krugman, *Lita: A Less Traveled R.O.A.D.* New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Lillian Ellison and Larry Platt, *The Fabulous Moolah: First Goddess of the Squared Circle*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Ric Flair, *To Be the Man*,

personalities into other venues. Hence, wrestler John “Bradshaw” Layfield markets himself as a wrestler/stock analyst, and HHH gives his audience tips on how to have a physique like his. The books provide ways for McMahon and his stars to pull back the curtain and allow fans a chance to see a little of the backstage lives of the superstars. Since the wrestling product sits at the threshold between fantasy and reality, fans are enthusiastic at any chance to get backstage information through these books about the “real people” behind the characters and storylines. Of course, the “real lives” are often a constructed narrative of their own, especially with certain wrestlers notorious for as much exaggeration off-screen as on-screen, but the memoir has become a very popular storytelling tool for the wrestlers, with varying degrees of verisimilitude.

McMahon has capitalized upon these opportunities and continues to market his stars in several ways outside his WWE programming. Layfield has appeared on Fox News Network and MSNBC as a stock analyst, for instance, and WWE is currently heavily involved in the voting process with the *Smackdown Your Vote* campaign. Wrestlers appeared at both the Democrat and Republican 2004 national conventions, and wrestlers Mick Foley and John Layfield have debated the candidates’ issues for the presidential election on a college campus in Florida.

New York: Pocket Books, 2004; Mick Foley, *Foley is Good*, New York: ReganBooks, 2001; Mick Foley, *Have a Nice Day!*, New York: Regan Books, 1999; Matt Hardy, Jeff Hardy, and Michael Krugman, *The Hardy Boyz: Exist 2 Inspire*, New York: ReganBooks, 2003; HHH and Robert Caprio, *Triple H: Making the Game*, New York: Pocket Books, 2005; Hulk Hogan and Michael Jan Friedman, *Hollywood Hulk Hogan*, New York: Pocket Books, 2002; Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Joe Layden, *The Rock Says...* New York: ReganBooks, 2000; Joanie Laurer and Michael Angeli, *Chyna: If They Only Knew*, New York: ReganBooks, 2001; Jerry Lawler and Doug Asheville, *It’s Good to Be the King...Sometimes*, New York: Pocket Books, 2002; John “Bradshaw” Layfield, *Have More Money Now: A Commonsense Approach to Financial Management*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Ken Leiker and Mark Vancil, *WWE Unscripted*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003; Jim Ross, *Can You Take the Heat?*, New York: ReganBooks, 2000; and Jim Ross, *J.R.’s Cookbook*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003. Mick Foley has produced two children’s books through the company’s publisher, and several trivia and “Year in Review” books have been published through WWE as well. Upcoming books include autobiographies from William Regal and former WWF Champion “Superstar” Billy Graham.

By making his stars visible in so many ways, McMahon exponentially enhances their images. In writing about the creation of the film star, John Ellis says that a star is “a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future star performances.”⁴⁶ According to Ellis, then, a star’s performance is a “culmination of the star images in subsidiary circulation: it is a balancing act between fiction and cultism.”⁴⁷ Ellis questions whether such a star could be created on television, but McMahon’s synergistic operation has worked to create such an effect for his wrestling “superstars” and thus give many extra layers of meaning to the weekly show through this ancillary information.

McMahon makes his product more diverse by marketing its product in new ways, and, in the process, possibly change some stereotypes about wrestling performers through success in more traditional media. Likewise, the WWE is able to create more and more products that its loyal fan base is likely to buy, thus providing investors and advertisers with proof as to the success of its synergistic operation. Wall Street seems to have found a steady trading level for WWE stock. Share prices recently rebounded to \$15.44, more than double their 2002 dismal low of \$6.86.⁴⁸ By the beginning of 2005, the stock was consistently trading between \$12 and \$13.⁴⁹

The WWE, unable to rest on its current status, is continuing to develop new, potentially profitable projects for the company. In addition to its new fantasy gaming operations and its

⁴⁶ John Ellis, “Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon,” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York: Oxford UP, 1999, 539-546, 539.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “WWE Stock Reaches 52 Week High at Close of Trading Day.” *Pro Wrestling Torch Web Site*. 22 April 2004. <http://www.pwtorch.com/artman/publish/article_7988.shtml>. Accessed 23 April 2004. Michael Brush, “Listen Up, Wimps! World Wrestling Is Back!” *CNBC Company Focus*, 7 January 2004, <<http://www.moneycentral.msn.com/content/P67758.asp>>, accessed 8 January 2004. Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 3 May 2004, 3. On 27 April 2004, the WWE also approved to increase its quarterly company dividend from four to six cents per share, leading the company to paying another \$4.2 million in dividends to stockholders in July 2004.

⁴⁹ WWE Investor Relations Web site. <http://corporate.wwe.com/invest/index_html>. Accessed 31 January 2005.

increasing emphasis on WWE Films, the company is now even planning to open an on-demand cable and satellite pay-per-view service from his video library of old wrestling events that may eventually expand into a full-time wrestling network.⁵⁰ The programming, called *WWE 24/7*, will feature several options to be selected from the company's archives for a monthly rate. This feature capitalizes on the desire of the WWE's most loyal fans to see or own it all—important matches and storylines from throughout wrestling history—and builds on the immense success of the DVD division of the company, tapping into a very large archive that could provide a lifetime of programming so long as the audience for the second-run programming continues to exist.

Although WWE has always had an international presence, it also continues to expand its television penetration internationally. WWE programming is seen in 11 languages and in 115 countries. Live events in other countries have helped the company tremendously, with 30 events outside North America in 2004 and recent successful tours in Japan and Mexico, as well as the company's consistent popularity in Canada.⁵¹ In fact, these global live events have led to the WWE's biggest attendance numbers because these fans do not often get to see the wrestling stars live. The company now tapes its television shows on European and Asian tours once every quarter so that global tours can be expanded and not cut short because of the weekly tapings in

⁵⁰ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 3 May 2004, 9. WWE currently owns its own WWWF/WWF/WWE library, as well as the WCW and ECW libraries, as mentioned. The WCW library also includes the Crockett Carolinas footage and the old Georgia library. Recently, the WWE has purchased the AWA library from the Minneapolis area and the SMW library from Tennessee and Kentucky and is on the verge of purchasing the Stampede Wrestling library from Calgary. The WWE is working on buying the World Class Championship Wrestling library from Dallas and has been trying to get the Mid-South, Florida and St. Louis Libraries. The plans for eventually creating its own network for this footage have included the hiring of Peter Clifford as Vice President of Affiliate Sales to market the idea to cable and satellite companies. Clifford formerly worked on marketing The Golf Channel and its Video-On-Demand project. The WWE has hired former in-ring wrestling personalities to help hype the project, including "Superstar" Billy Graham and "Chief" Jay Strongbow.

⁵¹ Brush. Ginocchio.

North America.⁵² Also, 2005's "New Year's Revolution" PPV event was held in Puerto Rico. The WWE has been expanding its presence in these international venues and will likely be doing more international business in the future, perhaps including more major WWE events and PPVs in Japan. The international success of the uniquely American WWE shows, often a very ethnocentric product, has changed the company's perception of its place in international business. Japanese fans even boo wrestlers when they attempt to use interpreters and cheer when the wrestlers speak in English. Because of the product's success in certain countries, the WWE has attempted to alter some of its regular stereotypic roles and allow, for instance, Japanese wrestlers who are not as popular in the U.S. to get more of the spotlight when touring Japan.

Several groups have attempted to create an alternative to McMahon's programming since the 2001 conglomeration. Wrestling promoter Jerry Jarrett and son Jeff Jarrett and Panda Energy's NWA TNA based in Nashville have had the most success by airing weekly \$10 PPV shows but are now going to a weekly show on Fox Sports Network and occasional PPVs. Currently, though, TNA pays Fox Sports to run the show.⁵³ Because TNA is paying for the slot, analysts like Dave Meltzer, who has said that TNA has taken weekly losses since beginning in 2002, doubt it can succeed.⁵⁴ The only other companies that have attempted a national run—the XWF and WWA—either had terrible showings or never got off the ground at all.

Despite the current control of the WWE on the wrestling world, challenges will continue. Without major competition, McMahon will have a harder time creating new stars. He has

⁵² Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 28 June 2004, 2. The WWE will have a television taping for both *RAW* and *Smackdown* in October, with another planned for Japan a few months later. Plans also include taping shows in Australia. According to Meltzer, "This was a decision suggested by WWE stockholders who have seen the growth of international business and weakening of domestic, since overseas shows are far more profitable. They had pushed for longer overseas tours, instead of the usual three to five dates that were being done. Vince McMahon's reasoning for the short tours is that the crews had to be back by Monday or Tuesday for the TV, as he was, for a while, against the idea of taping outside North America."

⁵³ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 26 April 2004, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 April 2004, 1.

expanded his media empire, however, to withstand falling ratings and has even begun to see a rebound in free business. So far, the WWE has been able to maintain control of the pro wrestling industry, making the company the monopoly of an on-again/off-again billionaire like McMahon. Because the WWE has capitalized on media synergy, it has been able to maintain its longevity. More importantly, the WWE has gained greater roots into its existing fan base by providing an increasing number of ways its product can be accessed.

As the company continues its marketing of the ephemeral wrestling star, it will be able to withstand a long drought of mainstream popularity if necessary because of its accretion of projects. Even without expanding its fan base, the WWE has been able to increase the number of ways that fans can access the WWE product and has thus made its product more valuable to the core fan. The company's business expansion may serve as a textbook example of the way to use media synergy to make a business profitable. Vince McMahon and the WWE have created a media empire that makes its one product, the fictional wrestling universe, ubiquitous through marketing it almost every available facet of mass media distribution.

Role-Playing in the Stands:

A Symbolic Interactionist Ethnography of Wrestling Fans

Introduction

Professional wrestling performances are staged in a live venue with several actors key to the overall show. The in-ring competitors are joined by the referee, the ringside announcer, the commentators, and the timekeeper to create the wrestling performance. However, many fans are not present merely to observe the show. Instead, the event is constructed and scripted so that they become *dramatis personae* in the overall performance in the role of a sports audience. Wrestling fans are spectators but are also expected to help preserve the façade of “legitimacy” in the fictional world of the wrestling event. This is fascinating from a communication perspective. Unlike actual athletic competition, wrestling shows lose any sense of meaning without a participating audience. Evidence of the widespread impact of wrestling on the culture can be seen in the fact that World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)’s programming on UPN and Spike TV remains the highest rated regular shows on both networks. Last year’s *Wrestlemania XX* event in Madison Square Garden on pay-per-view was purchased by 885,000 homes and viewed by millions, according to Meltzer (2005, p. 7).

Studies of role-playing in fantasy situations highlight the various layers of reality involved in cultural communication. Fine (1983) and other researchers extend Goffman’s

concepts of framing and staging to role-playing in fantasy-gaming experiences, while Jenkins (1992) examines ways in which fan cultures participate in “textual poaching,” extending the fantasies of television shows or even incorporating themselves into those fictional worlds. Relatively little research exists on the role-playing of pro wrestling audiences. Existing studies focus on a minority audience’s appropriation of the wrestling text through fan newsletters and online correspondence. However, researchers have not linked an ethnographic study of wrestling to the fundamental ways in which fans play roles simply by participating in live events. The research, while alluding to the role-playing strategies of fans, has neglected to examine specifically how fans engage in these processes. The present essay contributes both to existing literature on role-playing and to interdisciplinary research on pro wrestling by examining the multiple levels of fan involvement in live wrestling events and the various frames fans use while playing their roles.

The increasing level of involvement which fans engage themselves in while playing their roles demonstrates the complex process of role-playing during a large communal event. Wrestling fans do not believe in the veracity of the competition in the ring but operate simultaneously as one body while individual members engage with the text in various ways. Citing relevant research in role-playing and interdisciplinary ethnographic work on pro wrestling, this study builds on allusions to the complex level of fantasy involvement in wrestling texts for fans in prior scholarship by analyzing and categorizing the experiences of 50 wrestling fans at five live events. Using both in-depth interviews with fans during these shows and observations of these fans’ behaviors while they interact with each other and the performers during matches, this essay provides ethnographic evidence of the various ways fans engage themselves in the wrestling text. The ladder of involvement used to document the experience of wrestling fans from passive to increasingly active and reflective provides a tool for helping to

eliminate the ambiguity that has led other researchers to stereotype wrestling fans and their role-playing. The tool is meant to document the degree of involvement of fans and not to connote that more active fans are superior to more passive fans.

Existing Literature

The dual roles that some fans accept, that of both observers and actors simultaneously, is the concept explored through this research. Specifically, this ethnography examines the ways in which analyzing wrestling fans is important to understanding communal framing of role-playing in our culture. This study applies the theories of Goffman (1959) to the wrestling construct, particularly his dramaturgical concepts of front stage and back stage. While Wilshire (1982a, 1982b) warns that the dramaturgical model of behavior is often extended too far in explaining off-stage life, the use of Goffman's dramatic concepts is particularly apt in examining wrestling fans because the direct participation of the audience in the event as actors rather than just observers expands the stage so that the audience members become participants in the performance. Goffman (1974) also writes about the use of frames in communication to help create definitions in situations. Here, Goffman even links his theories to pro wrestling himself, discussing the ways in which wrestlers frame their performances for the fans and break from the traditional sports frame.

Both these concepts have been applied to the study of pro wrestling but more often to the wrestlers in the ring. Wrestling shows, however, are not a one-way form of communication, speaker to audience, but rather a communal acting event, involving all in the building who choose to participate in the action. Goffman's concepts are not meant to provide a simple explanation of the complex communication process involved in these pro wrestling events but rather as an organizational tool to make sense of the role-playing involved in the event.

While professional sports are spectacles, Atkinson (2002) claims that pro wrestling is a “double mimetic” because it is “in fact a mock sport *within* the make-believe world of professional sport” (p. 62). Consequently, although many scholars have found correlations between wrestling and the body of research in sociology of sports, the majority of ethnographic research on sports fans is not directly applicable to the world of pro wrestling. Craven and Moseley (1972) instead suggest that performance in wrestling be evaluated not as winning and losing as with other sports but as quality of performance or exhibition (p. 326). While wrestling fans often evaluate wrestlers for performance instead of outcome, they also role play as “sports fans,” giving fans acting roles that interpret or parody actual sports fans in the same ways wrestlers become interpreters or parodists of athletes. Some of the antics of professional wrestling are seen in all sports, but they are most complicated at wrestling events, where the interaction between the fans and on-stage performers is based on a situation communally defined as fictional or fantasy by all involved.

Most scholarly pieces involve analysis of televised matches instead of field research. Yet, the differences between wrestling as a form of television entertainment and wrestling as a live event involving shared performance are significant. Although few ethnographers have analyzed the fans’ performances, it is this communication at the live event among the wrestlers, officials, announcers, and audience that makes wrestling a distinct form of communication.

The study of role-playing stems from larger sociological pieces on play in culture but is not often linked to pro wrestling. Stone (1971) links the development of pro wrestling matches to the animal instinct to expend energy in play through mock fights. Rosenberg and Turowetz (1975), Turowetz and Rosenberg (1978), and Birrell and Turowetz (1979) examine the ways in which wrestlers build character identity. Current trends in the examination of role-playing have often concentrated on fantasy games. Fine (1983) analyzes the fantasy role-playing game as

social interaction, using Goffman's concept of framing to discern three layers of reality for those participating in the events: their concept of the real world, their concept of their gaming subculture, and their fictional roles that they play during the game. These concepts relate directly to the wrestling audience, where fans also leave the "real world" to enter a communal role-playing event that is very social in nature. Current studies by Turkle (1999) and McBirney (2004) have extended this concept into the Internet gaming environment.

The extant essays of role-playing of wrestling fans have primarily focused on specific subcultures of fans. Dell (1997, 1998) examines the female wrestling audience of the 1950s and their appropriation of the wrestling text through fan newsletters. Clerc (2004) and Salmon and Clerc (2005) study modern female wrestling audiences and their extending wrestling storylines through fiction written on the Internet. These works use concepts drawn from the influential study of Jenkins (1992) on the appropriation of mass media texts by fans in many different genres, a phenomenon he labels "textual poaching." None of these pieces focuses on the role-playing strategies of the community of fans attending live events, however. While Jenkins' study focused primarily on print media, the concept of textual poaching is applicable in the experience of fans at live events. Only Turko (1991) briefly analyze the live fans' role-playing directly by observing a group of fans who support a villainous wrestler, even coming to the event in costume to support him, to draw ire from the rest of the crowd.

Of the ethnographic research that does exist on live wrestling events, the majority has studied not the audience but the on-stage actors and the environment of the arena. Turowetz (1975), Freedman (1988), Mazer (1998), de Garis (1999), and Benaka (1991) observe the wrestling world from the perspective of the wrestlers themselves. Everard (2002) and Workman (1977a, 1979) incorporate interviews with wrestlers into their research, while Ortizano (1988)

uses interviews with journalists to consider the ways in which the newspaper industry covers pro wrestling.

Most ethnographic research on pro wrestling fans comes through quantitative data collection and studies of wrestling's negative effects on viewers. Griffin (1937), Bogardus (1952) Stone and Oldenberg (1967), and Ball (1990) analyze the demographic composition of wrestling audiences. Kingsmore (1968, 1970), Arms et al. (1979), Russell et al. (1988), and Williams (2002) study the effects of watching wrestling matches on the aggression levels and the desensitization to violence of viewers. Lemish (1999), O'Sullivan (1999), Nichols (2001), DuRant et al. (2001), Strand (2002), Bernthal (2003), and Oppliger (2003) interview and observe children and teenagers regarding their views and their behavior when discussing and watching professional wrestling. Likewise, Jhally and Katz (2002) are documentary makers who study pro wrestling from fan interviews that focus upon violence and gender constructs.

Several researchers have attempted to study the wrestling audience through a process of observation and interviewing that places the researcher more directly into the environment. Martin (1972), Jares (1974), Williams (1979, 1989), Freedman (1983, 1988), and Turko (1991) write observations of professional wrestling matches from the stands. Martin discusses on the reaction of fans to stock characters as a reflection of their perceived socioeconomic status. Fans also use wrestling as a major social opportunity for them to see each other on a regular basis if the wrestling is held regularly in one venue. Jares writes about observing the aggressiveness of a New York City wrestling crowd and the fact that, at that time, many of the blue-collar crowd members believed the action in the ring was partially real, thus differing from the modern pro wrestling fans. Williams (1979, 1989) and Freedman (1988) provide qualitative analysis of specific wrestling fans to examine their lives and motivations. Freedman (1983) writes about the aggression of fans in the arena, debating whether wrestling acts as catharsis or stimulant for this

aggression. Berger (1973, 1990) also debates the political repercussions for wrestling audiences after viewing wrestling storylines, although he uses no ethnographic evidence to ground his claims. Turko (1991) provides an overview of his research team's experience in the wrestling stands, describing their immersing themselves as fans, although he does not use specific interviews or data from the fans but rather general impressions. Also, Winningham (1972) presents a book-length photo essay of wrestling fans with interviews throughout the book.

A few ethnographers have worked more directly with fans. Workman (1977a, 1979) identifies fans on a spectrum from those who totally believe the action to those who distance themselves from it. He interviews both fans and wrestlers to construct this spectrum and the idea that one event can be perceived differently by each observer. This work is based on the initial theoretical research from Cravens and Moseley (1972). Saunders (1997) identifies several types of fans: nostalgic fans who watch wrestling because of their love of it as children, those who attend events as an activity the whole family can enjoy, those who enjoy observing violence, those who enjoy wrestling for spectacle/fantasy, and those who enjoy wrestling for athletic exhibition. She also writes about the more educated wrestling fans who respond to wrestlers not as part of the show but, using Craven and Moseley's perspective, from the wrestlers' abilities to act out their role effectively. Feigenbaum (2000) identifies wrestling fans on a spectrum consisting of four orders, from those who believe the event is real to those longtime fans who have extensive knowledge of the wrestling production and its history.

Perhaps the most effective use of ethnography of wrestling is from the study of communication theorist Nick Trujillo et al. (2000), an analysis of his communication studies class' visit to a 1993 WWE event. A companion piece is provided by Obenaus (1994), a student researcher from Trujillo's class with further ethnographic research building upon the initial group project. Both Trujillo et al. and Obenaus find that the vast majority of wrestling fans do

not consider what they see in the ring to be legitimate sport but rather as both a sporting exhibition and a drama, in which wrestlers play roles. Through fieldwork, Trujillo et al. discover that wrestling provides communication among the wrestlers and the crowd, confirming what scholars such as Webley (1986) and others have theorized. This essay builds on Trujillo's findings by categorizing the many ways through which the crowd interacts with the wrestling show with an organized ladder of involvement.

Specific Research Questions

The current literature on wrestling audiences indicates that while older studies suggest that fans believe wrestling to be "real," more in-depth analysis indicates that fans know they are playing roles and that the action in the wrestling ring is drama. The important question not addressed in current literature, however, is the exact ways in which audiences participate in their role as fans while attending live wrestling events.

Here, then, is the main question of research in this study: In what various ways do wrestling fans play their roles as "fans," and how do these ways interact with one another at a wrestling event, where the crowd is at once individual spectators and a communal whole? A set of sub-questions follows this main question of research:

- 1.) What front stage behaviors do the fans exhibit?
- 2.) What back stage beliefs and reasoning prompt the front stage performance by the fans?
- 3.) How do fans frame their roles when asked to analyze their own behavior?

These questions expand on the current bodies of literature on role-playing and pro wrestling by specifically identifying how fans become involved with the wrestling text. While existing research determines that wrestling fans are not simple-minded believers in the

authenticity of the competition in the ring, this project directly addresses the ways in which fans participate in the shows and provides a tool for organizing those complex responses.

Methods

When beginning this ethnographic study, one of my foremost modes of observation was as a participant in the show. I first participated in wrestling shows as an audience member, then as an actor in wrestling costume shows staged before fans in Hartford, Ky., and, finally, as a licensed professional wrestling manager. My interaction with fans and my realization of their distinct roles, not as spectators, but as performers themselves, came from direct participant observation. I first began attending wrestling shows as a fan at age 10. Since then, I have attended wrestling events in Kentucky, Indiana, Tennessee, Georgia, and Toronto, with crowds as small as a few dozen to as large as more than 60,000 and have engaged both as a passive and as an active fan myself. At a series of local shows in Kentucky called Bad to the Bone Wrestling (BBW), I would attend wearing an eccentric suit and would sit in the front row, engaging in feuds of my own with particular wrestlers who would come to my section to argue with me. At shows televised on cable and pay-per-view, I would often attempt to argue with fans in my section by cheering on whoever opposed their favorites and creating feuds within the stands.

As I performed in wrestling costume shows and wrestling shows over a six-year span, adults and children who yelled at me and threatened my life in the front stage of the arena ran into me in the back stage, quite literally, to tell me what a good job I was doing before again arguing with me “on stage” later in the show. From my observations as an on-stage actor, I realized that the audience members themselves deserved to be commended just as much for their acting abilities as I did, and perhaps more so. While I have not based this essay directly on my

on-stage participant observation both as an active fan and as an actual performer, these experiences have informed every aspect of my study.

Through experience as a wrestling spectator, I realized that because the audience was there primarily to watch and participate in the wrestling show, any interviews with them would have to be abbreviated. Therefore, I asked a series of 12 questions, six of which had open-ended answers. My primary goal was to obtain information from fans without hindering their experiences at the wrestling events. I based the questions on the informal observations made at previous wrestling events before beginning this research project. At each event, I approached fans and asked them if they could answer a series of questions for me regarding research for an academic project through my university. This approach was necessary to identify my purpose. After approaching the fans, I allowed them to answer at their convenience. I let the fans choose their preferred method of answering. Some fans set up brief interviews in the merchandising area during an intermission or an interview after the event because their active involvement in the shows prevented them from being able to talk during the matches. Others would suspend the interview during matches only to resume during the brief periods between the bouts because they did not want to miss observing or participating as fans. Because the fans were giving me their time, I allowed them to answer the questions in the method that made them most comfortable and in which they were most likely to give the questions full attention. I found no major differences in those interviews conducted during matches and those obtained from the alternative methods suggested by the fans.

I selected audience members randomly for my in-depth interview, trying to move from closer seats to farther seats, as the sections were available. At some events, the front rows were roped off, prohibiting access. Thus, there were some limitations to access at the larger events, prompting avoidance of the closest ringside seats. Only once did I have someone refuse to talk

to me, a fan who had been one of the most involved at his particular event, and so I moved to the person next to him instead. I did not interview anyone under the age of 18. At each event, I interviewed 10 audience members. I chose particular areas or seats before beginning the interview process and then interviewed the fans seated or standing in those areas. By distributing those sections throughout the arena at each event, I was able to achieve a reasonably random population. Because of the length of the wrestling event and the time necessary to schedule interviews and to make my way across the arena, I was only plausibly able to interview about 10 participants per show.

In a three-week period, I attended five wrestling shows. The first was a costume show in Hartford, Ky., with local residents dressing up as famous wrestling stars and putting on a show that was not considered “professional.” The building was at capacity, holding about 350 people. I personally participated in this show, posing as WWE owner Vince McMahon. I approached the fans I wanted to interview during the time I was not on-stage and then interviewed them after the event had concluded. Because I was an on-screen participant in the Hartford event, I decided that I would only be able to interview fans after the event had concluded. All data presented from the Hartford show, then, comes from observations I made while watching the crowd during my time off-stage. All 10 fans I approached agreed to complete the interview after the show concluded.

The second show, in Lawrenceburg, Ky., was a Salt River Wrestling (SRW) event with about 50 people in attendance. The third show was an Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) card in Louisville that was a television taping with about 750 fans in attendance. The fourth show was a National Wrestling Alliance Total Nonstop Action (NWA TNA) pay-per-view event in Nashville that was being aired live and that had about 1,200 fans in attendance. Finally, the WWE show in Evansville, a non-televised event, had about 3,000 in attendance. For each venue, I gained

permission to perform my study either from the arena manager or from the wrestling promoter, depending on who was easier to contact. For a list of the questions answered by each audience member, see “Appendix A.” These questions were selected to examine how fans become involved in such events and their own level of self-analysis regarding their involvement. Because I was attempting to assess the varying levels of involvement of audience members, it was important that my questions focus around the perception of each subject’s involvement and my observations of that involvement.

Initially, I hoped to discover the reasons that fans engaged in the wrestling text while knowing it was not an actual athletic competition in the ring. However, the data instead led to a more intriguing finding, that a great deal of diversity existed among the fans in the ways they engaged with the wrestling text. While I noticed this informally in my years spent as a participant observer, I had never realized how wrestling fans existed as a community while viewing their roles as fans in many different ways. The ladder of involvement I eventually found among wrestling fans was only discovered in data analysis. However, my questions were focused on finding the particular ways fans become involved in the shows so that responses would directly address the primary research question of my project.

Because this project was completed through examining only five shows in a particular geographic region in a short time period, this study is not meant to indicate that these results are applicable to every wrestling event but rather to offer a cultural snapshot of wrestling fans in this area. Each wrestling show is a unique cultural experience. My goal as a researcher was to capture the feelings of fans in my general research area at one time, around the month of February 2004, at a variety of wrestling events, from large productions to small ones. Because wrestling audiences and their involvement in shows tend to change as the wrestling product, and American culture itself, changes, I felt that it was important to limit my research to this specific

cultural snapshot. While there are many correlations across all of the events I analyzed, they are still situated in their geographic and time constraints. Thus, the reliability of the data and the validity of this project are situated in these limitations. I found this cultural snapshot particularly relevant because the Southern ‘rasslin’ audience has often faced the most stereotypes among pro wrestling fans.

The data were first recorded in a notebook during the interviews, with audience members identified by their age, sex, and occupation. The names of the respondents were not recorded. This information was accompanied by general field notes on the crowd participation at each event. Observational field notes were made before I began the interview process, as I watched the crowd take their seats and wait for the event to begin. I spent this time also deciding from which areas of the arena I would seek interview subjects. I also spent my time during a few of the matches at each event observing the general crowd responses from different places in the arena. These general field notes and the 50 interviews were then transferred to a word-processing document that listed each subject’s response to the questions separately.

The data were analyzed in a variety of ways. This study uses the concept of methodological triangulation, which is the critical examination of a research question through a variety of methods. In this case, I studied the answers to research questions by using a qualitative approach supplemented by quantitative data. Frey, Botan, & Kreps (2000) write that using both quantitative and qualitative analysis simultaneously “provide[s] researchers with different but potentially complementary” tools (p. 83). My quantitative analysis measures overall statistics from my sample of wrestling fans, while the qualitative aspect illuminates the individual perceptions of the wrestling fans in explaining their positions. According to Frey, Botan, & Kreps, the use of both can enhance precision and highlight general themes through quantitative analysis and provide context through qualitative analysis (pp. 84-85). Many

respected studies in the communication field use methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, including an example cited by Frey et. al. (p. 85) of the study by Eaves and Leathers (1991) on the communicative environments of McDonald's and Burger King. Both Ball (1990) and Turko (1991) acknowledge the use of triangulation in their studies of pro wrestling.

While quantitative analysis is used in this study to discern the frequency of certain responses from audience members, the majority of the critical focus is on qualitatively examining data through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, which searches for trends in qualitative data and attempts to find a meaning for these recurring themes, has been employed often in ethnographic research, such as that of Riedlinger, Gallois, McKay, & Pittam (2004), which looks at the use of social group processes in networked organizations.

I do not distinguish between the fans at each particular venue but combined data from all venues. Thus, the results are more inclusive than if I just analyzed small-town shows, on the one hand, or the WWE productions, on the other. Again, the hope is that this essay will provide a particular cultural snapshot of the Southern Indiana/Kentucky/Northern Tennessee area during February 2004. The study looks to capture the overall experience of attending a live wrestling event in this place and time and does not distinguish between the three non-televised events and the two televised events, even though each of the five shows was unique cultural experiences. Despite the many differences among the shows attended, the purpose of this project is to discover overall themes in all wrestling shows attended in this time and place and not to contrast the differences among each show. Also, this study does not attempt to break down analysis among gender or age groups or any other demographic but instead illuminates general themes in the ways that audience members participate in events.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Findings/Themes

The average age of the 50 fans I interviewed was 32.8. Of the 50 people interviewed, the majority identified themselves either as factory laborers (9) or as those involved in the service, retail, and skills-related industries (9). The next largest group was that of students (6), followed by both white-collar workers (6), housewives (6), disabled (5), unemployed (5), self-employed (2), and retired (1). On average, they traveled about 45 minutes to get to the shows. Of those interviewed, 29 were male and 21 were female.

The fans, on average, attended about 23 wrestling shows a year. Of the 50 interviewed, six identified themselves as not being fans, while four identified themselves as occasional fans and four identified themselves as recently becoming fans. The remaining 36 identified themselves as long-time or lifelong fans. When asked why they came, because so many local shows were involved, fifteen respondents identified their reason for coming as knowing someone who was in the show. Ten respondents noted their love for the wrestling aspect of the show, while eight said they came because they loved the personalities. Seven respondents came to the show because of a spouse, child, or friend who wanted them to come, while four came primarily to learn moves because they wanted to be wrestlers themselves, three came primarily as a social event, and one came to observe the show for a photojournalism school project.

These results were fairly evenly distributed across the five shows attended for this project. Results of the quantitative analysis of the audience members interviewed found a majority of fans appeared to fall in the middle class, although the distribution was varied according to occupation. The difference between male and female spectators was not as pronounced as one might expect from a pro wrestling crowd, considering it is most often referred

to as a male soap opera. Informal observations at each event appeared to confirm that the results of my sample coincided with the gender division in the arenas.

Qualitative Findings/Themes

While the quantitative/demographic analysis provides background information that helps identify the base of audience participants interviewed during this ethnography, the important discussion comes in the responses to three questions:

- 1.) How do you participate in the event, if you do?
- 2.) Do you think wrestling is real competition or a choreographed show?
- 3.) If you do think wrestling is a choreographed show, why do you get into or participate in the event?

Question two, which examined the ways wrestling fans framed the event they were attending, found that all 50 respondents said they thought wrestling was a show, some laughing at the question before I could even finish asking it. While the question put some on the defensive, as if I were to question the validity of the athletic ability of the performers, they were quick to point out that injuries are real and that the wrestlers are athletes in good physical condition. All indicated that they enjoyed wrestling while knowing that it is not an actual athletic competition.

Of those interviewed, 22 identified themselves as only observers, while the other 27 identified themselves as active members of the audience. The observers said they came to watch the process, usually to watch both the wrestlers and the audience members perform their roles. While the observer/fan division can be made at other sporting events as well, pro wrestling's relationship between the two is distinctively different when one considers that all those

interviewed did not believe in the authenticity of the competition in the ring. Of the 27 who said they were active audience members, two of them identified themselves as cheering athletic feats and prowess, while the other 25 cheered and booed based on their favorite characters and performers. Thus, an audience can be broken down between those who identify themselves as observers and those who identify themselves as part of the show. According to my research, about half of the wrestling fans view themselves as active participants in the show, while the other half either observes quietly or claps at the performances.

The most interesting question for fans is particularly regarding the half that actively participated in the show. In what ways do they engage in role-playing when interacting with each other and the actors on stage? The answers are fairly complex. Similarly, for those who just observe, what do they enjoy about the process and what role do they see the active fans as having in the show?

Through an analysis of the answers to these questions, a set of themes becomes apparent. Members of the wrestling audiences adapted to their roles as fans in several ways. The analysis moves from focusing on fans in a back stage observer role into those in an increasingly active, front stage role. The research reveals that audience members, as spectators, fulfill a back stage role, but, also, as performers themselves, fulfill an increasingly active front stage role. This finding through field research coincides with what scholars such as Fiske (1987, 1989) have said, that wrestling abolishes “the categorical distinction between spectacle and spectator” (1987, p. 245).

While nearly all fans agreed that they enjoyed the events for their unpredictability and entertainment, others expressed a more profound appreciation of the athletic and artistic worth of the event. An even more involved group of fans expressed their love of wrestling events for the community feeling that it produced for the fan base. Even more directly involved in the show

were the group of fans who discussed their “suspension of disbelief,” to use a phrase originally used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge about theater and first borrowed by Craven and Moseley (1972) to describe the experience of pro wrestling fans. Some of these fans said this suspension of disbelief produced a cathartic result for them. Others took even more active roles by saying they suspended their disbelief for others in the audience who did not know the show was not real. A few even candidly discussed the roles of the audience in the show.

Together, these various levels of interaction with the text of the event by wrestling fans form a ladder of involvement that goes from passive to increasingly active and reflective. This ladder begins with the more passive roles of wrestling fans: as observers who enjoy wrestling’s entertainment and unpredictability and as observers who enjoy wrestling’s artistic and athletic merit. Then, it examines the increasingly active levels of participation by fans: as members of a wrestling community, as participants in suspending disbelief, as participants in catharsis, and as participants in attempting to suspend the disbelief of others. Finally, this ladder of involvement examines the fans who articulated self-reflection of their role as actors. This thematic analysis of fan responses provides the basis for the categorization of the ladder of involvement.

Entertainment and Unpredictability

The vast majority of responses to the question came in favor of viewing wrestling as entertaining and unpredictable. These respondents generally said they were able to participate in wrestling as fans and get into the actions because, even if the wrestlers knew the endings of the contest, the fans didn’t, so it was not important that the matches were pre-determined. This majority of fans also talked about the entertaining performances in the show. A 20-year-old male student at the SRW show said:

- 1 Wrestling shows are entertaining, like a soap or a movie. I need something to get
- 2 me off, and it’s pro wrestling for me. This is the only sport where the crowd can

3 come and interact with the performers and the wrestlers can communicate with
4 the fans. It is like a soap opera off the set.

A 32-year-old female waitress at the WWE show agreed with this analysis:

5 To me, it is like a soap opera with violence.

Other fans emphasized their enjoyment by their lack of knowledge of what had been written to happen at the show.

A 51-year-old male meat-cutter at the OVW show said:

6 It's the show, the entertainment. You know what I'm saying. I don't know who's
7 winning. I wouldn't like that. It doesn't matter otherwise.

A 31-year-old male video retail store manager at the OVW show said:

8 They may know how it will end, but, as a fan watching, I don't know how it will
9 end until the bell rings. It is like theater.

The two themes are prevalent in these answers. Both respondents from the OVW show emphasize that they don't know what is happening, so it does not matter that the endings are planned out (lines 6-7, 8-9). Similarly, all three compare wrestling to other forms of entertainment: soap operas (lines 1, 4, 5), movies (line 1), "shows" (lines 1, 6), and theater (line 9). These fans express their enjoyment of the show from little more than a spectator role, although they do vaguely suggest that the show involves their participation as fans "interacting" and getting into the suspense of not knowing what will happen (lines 2-4, 8-9). They have framed the event as an exhibition that is both athletic and entertaining, so they are able to enjoy the event as spectators, a back stage role. However, since almost everyone I interviewed filled this role, both the observers and the active fans framed the event in this manner, as entertaining and unpredictable. The more active fans would fall into multiple other categories as they became more and more involved in front stage behavior.

Athletic and Artistic Merit

Several expressed their love of the show because of the athletic and artistic merit of the performers and their appreciation of that art. They indicated they could immerse themselves in the performance of something they know is not “real” because of the incredible skill of the actors/athletes. These fans emphasized that the wrestlers are good actors and that they take a great degree of punishment to put on the representation of violence, feeling that these injuries are “for” the fans. A 24-year-old unemployed female at the OVW show said:

10 (The wrestlers) have to do a lot of difficult things. People can get broken necks or
11 broken noses. They can get hurt.

Similarly, a 19-year-old female student at the NWA TNA show said:

12 Wrestling takes an extreme amount of athleticism. A pro wrestler may be an
13 actor, but it is still physical, and they are still thrown on the ground and hit with
14 chairs. Even if it is fake, it hurts.

The appreciation for the athletic performance was enhanced by an appreciation of artistic merit as well.

A 20-year-old male factory worker at the NWA TNA show said:

15 I enjoy the athleticism. It is a performance. Since I have been trained, it changes
16 the way I have looked at wrestling.

Also, a 40-year-old self-employed female artist at the Hartford show said:

17 These people are artists as well. They have to be creative. Wrestling is
18 choreographed art.

Many of those who responded in this way had first-hand knowledge of wrestling, either from being trained to wrestle themselves or from knowing those who operate in the business. They emphasized the dangerous aspects of wrestling and the need for training, repeatedly saying that it “hurts” (lines 10-11, 14) and that understanding the training gives them a greater understanding of the performance (lines 15-16, 17-18). Thus, they were able to appreciate the athletic and

performative aspect of wrestling because they know the differences between the actor's real personality and the stage persona, the face that the wrestler wears in the ring. While it is not likely that the majority of pro wrestling fans have had legitimate training, several of these fans appeared to have engaged in some sort of pro wrestling activity and considered themselves as knowing and understanding a pro wrestling performance.

Feeling of Community

As Martin (1972) stated, wrestling, especially at local venues with weekly events, provides a regular community and a place for social interaction for fans. A couple of fans mentioned this need for social acceptance as part of their reason for coming. A 28-year-old disabled man at the SRW show said that he enjoyed coming because

19 I like to watch the audience carry on and act like idiots, and I join in with
20 everybody else.

A 22-year-old male irrigation worker at the SRW show also emphasized the feeling of community among the fans:

21 I know the fans. I have gotten to know a lot of people here, and I have gotten
22 some enemies along the way here, too. I come here every Sunday.

The emphasis is on the arena being more than just a place to watch an event but instead on the event being a gathering place for fans. This more active role of an event for fans to be more than just spectators helps to frame the higher levels of response that involve suspension of disbelief and the fulfillment of the scripted role of fans.

Suspension of Disbelief

Several audience members mentioned that more than just appreciation for the entertainment and art of wrestling and a chance to socialize, wrestling gave them a chance to forget about their knowing it is fake and to get into the act themselves, thus making them active

participants in the show at this point. A 67-year-old male drilling contractor from the Hartford show said:

23 I get to watching it, and I get carried away. It's easy to get tore up or pissed off
24 about something if you get into it.

Similarly, a 74-year-old male preacher at the Hartford show says:

25 They make it look real, and you want to believe it is real when you are watching
26 it. You can get carried away and act like it's real, even when you know it's not.
27 But when these people get slammed, you know it is still real some because you
28 hear the thump!

A 22-year-old female factory worker at the Hartford show said this is how she gets into the show as well:

29 I guess I enjoy them because, when I watch on TV and am home alone, I get
30 caught up in the moment and yell too when I watch a show. This is right in front
31 of me. Even if it is a storyline, no matter what I scream, they are still going to do
32 the story. It is exhilarating because I get caught up in the moment, especially
33 when they have good actors and good characters. It is a chance to go back to your
34 childhood and forget that you're watching acting for a little while.

Thus, the fan, by this point, has become an actor as well, pretending not to know that wrestling is not real and reveling in that acting role. The language of the average responses in this category is demonstrated above by fans who get “carried away” (lines 23, 26) and “caught up in the moment” (lines 30, 32) That emphasis on “the moment” of suspension of disbelief seems key in their enjoyment of the show and their active participation as the “front stage” fan.

At this point, the wrestling fan, just as the wrestler does, is operating in front stage communication. The fans could talk to me during intermissions about the process or even during the match, simultaneously yelling and participating in their acting stage and talking to me in back stage communication. Other fans, unable to switch so fluently back and forth between the two, said they could not talk to me about it while matches were on. In fact, some scholars, such as

Morton and O'Brien (1985), have written about the wrestling fan's tendency to be angered when a wrestler errs in his or her performance because it breaks their suspension of disbelief.

Suspension of Disbelief Through Catharsis

Beyond just the suspension of disbelief were a group of fans who are able to get something out of their role as active wrestling fans. These fans that seemed to treat wrestling as therapy for their own anger and frustration discussed the role of catharsis in wrestling, going beyond suspending disbelief and into living vicariously through the performers in the ring. By this, they are able to act out their personal aggressions by watching the actors in the ring, getting into the action as a way of releasing personal tension. As opposed to the interest in wrestling as entertainment or wrestling as art or of wrestling as a social event, this actually brings the wrestling fan even more into the active process of what is happening in the show, surpassing a suspension of disbelief and into an even more active role, taking something from the performers as well as giving something back. The 74-year-old male preacher at the Hartford show said:

35 Subconsciously, everybody has somebody somewhere he wants to see done that
36 way. Grandma can't yell "break his arm" out normally because we would take
37 her to Hopkinsville (a town in the region where a mental hospital is located), but
38 she can do it watching wrestling. We can't do these sorts of things or act this way
39 in our own lives, so we can watch the wrestlers do it.

Similarly, the 22-year-old female factory worker at the Hartford show said:

40 It is a good excuse to yell and not get in trouble.

Two respondents at the SRW show agreed with this viewpoint. One of those, a 28-year-old disabled man, explained the personal catharsis of wrestling for him:

41 That's why I enjoy watching wrestling—you can cuss them out. They made an
42 announcement earlier that we can't cuss while we're here. That won't hold up
43 long. When they cuss at my boy, I really get mad as hell...I really like to hoot
44 and holler and just carry on. It gives me a chance because I can't do that at home.

This reaction was similar to theories mentioned by Coleman (1984) and others, that wrestling fans enjoy their roles because they are empowered by providing support or disapproval to the

wrestlers. A pro wrestling show allows these fans the chance to dispose of social norms while in their role as wrestling fans.

Many of those I interviewed expressed an enjoyment of the violence in the matches, but most of them stressed that they enjoyed it most because they knew they were not actually cheering real violence, with the performers actually trying to hurt each other. In this way, the audience is not only realizing their front stage role as audience members of suspending disbelief, but they are also framing the event in a way that they not only give a performance as audience member but also receive a cathartic feeling from watching. Despite continued critiques of catharsis and its application to wrestling voiced in Kingsmore (1968, 1970), Arms, et. al. (1979), Russell, et. al. (1988), and Williams (2002), among others, many wrestling fans believe it fulfills this function for them.

Suspending Disbelief for Others

Even beyond the responses of those fans who expressed suspension of disbelief for themselves were those fans who emphasized the importance of suspending disbelief for others. Interestingly, this view was expressed to some degree in several of my interviews, with two articulating it rather well. That this thought would exist even though none of the 50 respondents thought wrestling was real is particularly interesting. However, these fans nevertheless believed they must be active to make the event authentic for those who still believe it is real. These fans attempted to take into account the frame of mind of other audience members and adjust their own behavior accordingly. They indicated that they behaved in the way expected by those fans who think its real, even if that group does not exist—not even in the children’s groups, according to many of the parents.

A 40-year-old self-employed female artist at the Hartford show said:

45 Some people actually believe this. I participate in the show to help make it seem
46 more real for them. If I get really into it, then I can make it feel more real.

Similarly, a 52-year-old disabled woman at the OVW show said she enjoyed wrestling despite its not being a legitimate sport and wanted to help others believe it is real:

47 I really enjoy it, and I know that many of these people here think its real.

The 22-year-old female factory worker from the Hartford show also made a brief remark about how not participating in the show as she should would be like ruining Santa Claus for some of the other people. It seems, then, that this suspension of disbelief for others could be a sort of “Santa Claus syndrome,” in that fans are actively trying to protect a societal myth for other fans. They see themselves as more sophisticated fans and are determined to protect and preserve the innocence of the other fans who believe. The fans participating at this level, then, believe that they are the wrestling fans that defy the stereotype of the naïve wrestling fan. However, by believing that other fans actually fit the stereotype, these fans ironically perpetuate this myth. This perceived role of needing to suspend the disbelief demonstrates the perceived frame that these fans have of the overall audience and serves as a way to justify their own behavior, that they are acting as active fans not for themselves but for the good of the naïve audience members. It is interesting to note that the three audience members who articulated this point most clearly were all female. Many of the female audience members observed at the events were with children, and mothers and fathers both often seemed to be involved in vocally participating as fans to encourage their children to get involved in the show as well.

Audience Role

Some audience members acknowledged their own understanding of the role of the audience, stating that they had an obligation as audience members to respond in certain ways. A 21-year-old female student at the Hartford show said:

48 That’s part of the show. Even the audience has a role. They have to act as if they

49 believe it and get into it.

Although she identified herself as an observer, this respondent said she realized that the crowd participation by the active crowd members was essential for a good show.

Similarly, a 25-year-old female hairdresser at the Hartford show said:

50 The people are up there in the ring doing their thing, and they need our help and
51 support to keep in character. Basically, that's why I cheer and go on.

At the WWE show in Evansville, one respondent acknowledged the need for the audience to participate or the show would be ruined, implying that the audience missing a cue is as detrimental to the show as a performer missing a cue. This 30-year-old housewife said:

52 The crowd's screaming and hollering makes the show. If the crowd is quiet, the
53 show is boring.

Here, the respondent acknowledges what others in the less active categories knew as well through their actions, even if they did not articulate it in their responses. They were active in the show because they were expected to be. It was the perceived frame of behavior by which the audience was expected to communicate. This role for fans was their front stage communication, while their interviews with me was their back stage communication. Some of the fans simply could not enter the back stage articulately to comment on that front stage, partially due to a defensiveness about questions of wrestling's validity in some cases and partially due to the timing of the interview during their front stage role.

Conclusion

To return to the main research question of this study—in what ways fans partake in role-playing at pro wrestling events—the answer seems to vary by fan on a ladder of involvement, as fans increasingly enter the front-stage role from a passive back-stage role as spectator. Fans are passively involved when they are observers watching either for entertainment and unpredictability or for the actors' athletic and artistic merit. Fans then participate in increasingly

active levels: as members of a wrestling community, as participants in suspending disbelief, as participants in catharsis, and as participants in attempting to suspend the disbelief of others. Finally, this ladder of involvement acknowledges fans who actively engage in self-reflection of their roles as actors. The more involved that fans become in their roles depends on how much they identify themselves as active fans or as observers. Fans see it as their obligation to play the roles as sports fans on the front stage. In their back-stage reasoning, many of the fans interviewed framed their behavior as a duty both to the performers in the ring and, in some cases, to the other fans who they perceive may believe the show to be real.

The data emphasize the roles of fans as actors in the pro wrestling live event. The fans validate Goffman's theories of front and back stage and framing. Furthermore, their framing of the wrestling process both for themselves and others emphasizes an interesting example of Goffman's theory of frames, that of the "Santa Claus syndrome." This desire to keep a façade alive for more "naïve" others extends into other realms such as pro wrestling, where fans try to protect the perceived innocence of others by pretending to believe in the show, even when the data indicates that there are very few fans who believe wrestling is not a show. Particularly, the ladder of involvement constructed to analyze the findings of this study is applicable to future studies of wrestling fans. The ladder provides a tool by which researchers can avoid stereotyping wrestling fans by acknowledging the various ways in which audience members interact with the text. Such a nuanced tool eliminates the ambiguity of viewing a diverse community of fans as one group, when individual members are involved in the text of the live wrestling event on various levels.

While the creation of a clearly articulated ladder of involvement for pro wrestling fans provides a framework for future research on pro wrestling audiences, this analysis also helps

advance studies of communal role-playing experiences. Wrestling is the largest live role-playing event, where thirty or forty on-stage actors interact with up to thousands of fans who are also playing roles and who know that they are participating in a fictional event. The ladder of involvement found through this study shows the complex ways in which a large live audience participates in role-playing and the varying layers of interaction that can be involved in one communal role-playing event. This ladder supplements studies of textual poaching, fantasy gaming, and online gaming interaction by stressing both the unique attributes of the role-playing experience for wrestling crowds and also the ways in which these events are similar to other role-playing experiences. These results build on Fine's notion of the three ways in which participants in role-playing can define themselves: through their real-world self, their participation in the gaming subculture, and the fictional roles they are playing during the game. Similarly, wrestling fans often distinguish between their behavior in wrestling arenas and their lives at home, their existence as a communal society just by being wrestling fans, and their awareness of the roles they play as "fans." Wrestling shows are one of the few arenas through which to examine mass communal role-playing and provide a chance to engage in role-playing ethnography away from the growing impact of online interaction and fantasy gaming.

Because this study was conducted as a "cultural snapshot" of one geographic area, that being southern Indiana, Kentucky, and northern Tennessee, the results cannot necessarily be reflective of the nation as a whole. Also, the study was conducted within a three-week span in January and February 2004 and does not take into account any other time period. The roles of children were not examined in this study, so this is in no way reflective of the beliefs of fans under the age of 18.

The data obtained from this study open several future avenues of research. For instance, there seemed to be several levels of involvement among the audience of the small Hartford show,

where the performers were even more “actors” than usual, parodying familiar wrestling stars that are actors themselves, and where the fans knew most of the people in the show personally. Also from this set of data, a study could be made comparing the audiences of each show, as there were major differences between the Hartford, SRW, OVW, NWA TNA, and WWE audiences.

Another comparison that could be made would be the use of this data in analyzing wrestling shows to be aired on television. In these cases, the writers of wrestling shows must plan the roles of the audience by predicting what the audiences will do in each situation, while the audiences must attempt to interpret how the writers want them to react. Particularly, the differences between crowd participation at televised and non-televised events would be an appropriate study from the data collected here because the presence of the camera invariably changes the event from both the fans’ and the promoters’ perspectives. Analyzing the differences in fan interaction based on their proximity to the ring might also yield interesting results. Finally, connecting theories of role-playing to the wrestling audience could also lead to an examination of the causes and effects of situations in which the audience of televised events purposefully rebelled against the roles that were written for them in the show. What this study suggests is that any of the above projects must avoid stereotyping wrestling as one body engaging in the text in one particular way and instead emphasize the myriad ways wrestling fans become involved in the events.

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Afterward

While I concluded these three essays, I also developed preliminary research projects which I hope to continue in the future. For example, my work on comparing pro wrestling to Shakespeare, in a rough form, will continue at some point. O. Grant Bruton, a Harvard Law graduate and Shakespeare aficionado from Louisville, has given me a lot of valuable advice on my initial Shakespeare piece. However, I have found my knowledge of Shakespearian theater still lagging behind my knowledge of pro wrestling. Thus, I feel that this is an idea to explore sometime in the future.

A project on the history of women's wrestling and the current presentation of women in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE—the WWF was forced to change its name because of a

lawsuit with the World Wildlife Fund) for a writing workshop class with Dr. Dale Rigby led to a semester-long examination of the histories, video footage, and memoirs about female wrestling performers. Although the project did lead to a presentation at the 2004 national Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference in San Antonio, the resulting essay is still far from completed. I have also worked on a history of the territory system, focusing on the McMahon family operation in the Northeast and their World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) territory dating back to 1963. That research has involved scanning old card listings gathered by Graham Cawthon and distributed on the Web, as well as various wrestling histories. Although it has greatly informed all my other work, this is another project that has taken a back seat to the chapters in this thesis.

The project nearest to completion that does not appear in this thesis is also the most time-consuming research I have done, an annotated bibliography of existing scholarship on pro wrestling across disciplines. This process has led to a strong knowledge of the literature on wrestling that I feel greatly benefits all three pieces that appear in this senior thesis, as well as my other ongoing projects. Furthermore, I have not only collected published work but also unpublished dissertations, Master's theses, and conference presentations along the way. Much of my research led me into direct contact with the authors of these pieces. The intellectual journey that this interactive annotated bibliography began might have awakened my intellectual curiosity more than any other. Today's Internet accessibility allows most of these scholars on pro wrestling to be only an e-mail away, and over 90 percent of the authors I contacted were delighted to discuss their work. Because pro wrestling research is so recent, most of the scholars I have read are still living, and many are active in the university system.

The annotated bibliography remains my most active ongoing project. The work I have put Selina Langford and Debra Day through in our Interlibrary Loan office here at WKU is probably

criminal, and this thesis and the eventual bibliography owe much of their broad inclusiveness to the librarians' work in obtaining hard-to-find theses and dissertations and convince other libraries to send them to us. I also have to thank many scholars for agreeing to send me their unpublished essays via e-mail and trusting me to honor the privacy of their work. The bibliography has already led to a presentation at the Northeast Popular Culture Association Conference in Brookline, Massachusetts, in October 2004, and I hope to someday publish it as well.

Included below is an excerpt from the annotated bibliography project. The bibliography lists the literature in chronological order; I have included pieces from 1996 and 1997. This small sampling of what is currently over seventy pages of research may give some indications as to the wide variety of scholarship that has been completed on pro wrestling, both published and unpublished, and what I hope to accomplish by documenting and reacting to these pieces in the final product. Again, one of the most valuable aspects of the bibliography is the opportunity it provides to contrast studies on wrestling from various disciplines. I have included with each excerpt category divisions to give some indication as to the type of study done, although the interdisciplinary nature of some works—such as the essays by Chad Dell and Henry Jenkins—makes it difficult to place them in a category. As evidenced by the sample below, the bibliography presents a wide range of scholars from all along the academic trajectory, ranging from undergraduates to established faculty:

Campbell, John W. "Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins." *Journal of American Culture* 19.2 (Summer 1996), 127-132.

LITERARY CRITICISM

John W. Campbell provides one of the first scholarly works on pro wrestling storylines through the tools of traditional literary criticism. Using the theoretical underpinning provided by Barthes, Fiske, Freedman, Mondak, and Morton and O'Brien, Campbell seeks to answer a question often posed in wrestling: why the bad guy wins. His result is an academic study that shows intimate knowledge of specific wrestling storylines read in contrast with the unfolding

world events of the time. The article, focusing on the WWF of 1993, examines three WWF villains and the cultural reasons for their characters. Yokozuna provides a metaphor for U.S. anxiety over Japan's economic dominance. Kamala represents the Africa that the U.S. was beginning to aid, while former manager Kim Chee represents the dominant warlords that have repressed the African public. Doink the Clown represents the fear of serial killers such as Gacy who outwardly seem happy but are inwardly evil. He asserts that wrestling is uplifting to lower classes and often does not make sense to the upper classes and that wrestling provides metaphors for fans to work out their own cultural anxieties. He mentions, however, that the hero will always avail in the end, although he neglects to note that in two of the three situations he mentions, the defeated hero never actually gains his revenge, but rather another hero down the line does.

Dawson, Don, Peter J. Maurin and Ken Phillips. *It's Only Wrestling: Everyone's Guide to Professional Grunt and Groan*. St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Shooting Star Press, 1996.

OVERVIEW

This book, which claims to be a study of wrestling from various academic fields, provides a general overview of the wrestling world from the "smart" perspective, working to counteract the majority of wrestling books at the time (which normally provided a fictionalized account of wrestling history and characters, written within the fictional wrestling world). Dawson and company provide a good mixture of topics including history, a section on the life of the wrestler and the wrestling families, drugs and other problems in wrestling, wrestling and television, wrestling journalism, and racism and sexism in wrestling. The book, however, is general in nature and does not make any particular academic arguments such as the books by Morton and O'Brien and Ball. For an overview of the wrestling world, it is very worthy and well constructed. Also, the authors clearly indicate their allegiance to the wrestling of their childhood and spend much of the work indicating their displeasure with the modern form of wrestling, romanticizing many aspects of their era of wrestling. Its title indicates its audience, despite its academic authors, such as Dawson, and its various claims: It is a guide for "everyone" and is thus fairly general in its descriptions.

Shea, Joshua. "Professional Wrestling." Unpublished undergraduate study, Roger Williams University, 1996.

ETHNOGRAPHY, OVERVIEW

This most valuable part of this study is the examination of the Internet, as Shea analyzes RSPW, a communication forum board between wrestlers and fans that allows fans to directly access their favorite stars. Shea predicts that the next wrestling boom will come through the Internet. Although those predictions have not necessarily come true, Shea's analysis shows that wrestling on the Internet mirrors the ways that wrestling adapted to television. Wrestling has begun broadcasting shows on the Internet, but the Internet, by no means, replaces its television presence. This undergraduate study, available on the Internet, also provides general information about existing literature on wrestling, metaphors of the wrestling community as a family, interviews with a few wrestlers, and a general piece about the cyclical nature of wrestling's boom periods.

Dell, Chad Edward. *Researching Historical Broadcast Audiences: Female Fandom of Professional Wrestling*. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1997.

HISTORY, MEDIA ANALYSIS, GENDER STUDIES, ETHNOGRAPHY, FAN ETHNOGRAPHY

The third dissertation encountered on American professional wrestling, Chad Dell's *Researching Historical Broadcast Audiences* provides a multi-faceted look at the female fandom of 1950s wrestling. To examine this, his piece—weighing in at 450 pages—looks at several aspects. From the network level, he examines how NBC's internal documents, advertising, and programming consistently ignored the large female fan base of wrestling. From the televised wrestling shows available to view, he examines the women shown in the crowd and the way that commentators and wrestlers interact with these female fans. From the journalistic level, he examines how the chiefly patriarchal news culture showed apprehension and even dismay at the sexualized and aggressive acts of women wrestling fans in the 1950s. From the wrestling press, he examines the gradual change from an entirely masculine "factual" point of view to a more feminine "familial" point of view, noting that wrestling magazines were much more dependent on providing content for their readers than more mainstream news sources, which relies on advertising more. He then examines the fan clubs and fan club newsletters run chiefly by female fans as an instance of empowerment by women who directly took a voice. Finally, he discusses the relationship between male wrestlers and female fans in the 1950s by discussing the issues with former fans, looking back on the experience. Dell concludes that, in the oppressive culture of the 1950s, pro wrestling was one of the discourses women used to become active voices, enjoying their flaunting of sexuality and aggression, becoming physically and vocally involved in matches. His piece is nuanced and provides a very interesting historical perspective on gender issues of the 1950s, as well as an in-depth critique of the mainstream media, wrestling media, and the underground fan club media movement, acknowledging the specific ways in which it empowered the female fans of that time period.

Jenkins, Henry. "‘Never Trust a Snake’: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama." *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1997. 48-78.

LITERARY CRITICISM, GENDER STUDIES

Henry Jenkins' first work on pro wrestling, "Never Trust a Snake," is a nuanced approach to examining the entertainment form that is seminal for many later studies. Jenkins deviates from the majority of previous literature on the subject and rests his analysis on an intense study of pro wrestling storylines, much as Campbell did and, earlier, Workman did as part of his analysis of wrestling as folklore. Jenkins' opening, which compares the philosophy of scholar Roland Barthes with wrestler Jake "The Snake" Roberts, sets up his approach perfectly, just as his conclusion does, noting that wrestling presents metaphor for all extremes, giving a voice to the voiceless and providing anti-hegemonic messages while simultaneously reinforcing dominant patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, and gender role. His research shows a tremendous knowledge of both existing scholarship on the melodrama and pro wrestling, as well as WWF programming. His use of theory to interpret wrestling storylines set the stage for one of the most fruitful and productive ways to examine wrestling, through the storylines presented

from week to week on WWF television programming. Jenkins asserts that wrestling is both melodrama and sport, with masculine content wrapped in a traditionally feminine way of storytelling. He focuses on the male working-class portion of the audience, noting that this is by no means the only audience of wrestling, finding both populist and fascist messages in the text. Jenkins writes about the consistent fictional world of the wrestlers and also discusses the use of female characters in the text, such as the whore Sensational Sherri and the virginal Miss Elizabeth, examining the domestic drama that unfolds between Randy Savage and Miss Elizabeth. He also discusses the prevalence of class warfare in the WWF.

My decision to continue studying pro wrestling led to my interest in Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies program. I am hoping not only to continue some of the research avenues outlined here but to also form new ones as I continue to examine professional wrestling and its impact on American society. I hope to answer the following questions:

- 1.) Why is wrestling often considered "low-class?" What implications does this have on wrestling shows and the ways both fans and promoters construct their behaviors?
- 2.) Why do wrestling fans become involved? What does the composition of the audience indicate about race, class, and gender issues in the "sports entertainment" world?
- 3.) How can future study and teaching of professional wrestling fit into a larger academic framework and the traditions of particular academic disciplines?

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

- 1.) Do you mind to participate in a brief survey about the show tonight?
- 2.) What is your age?
- 3.) What is your profession?
- 4.) Where are you from and how long did it take you to get to the event tonight?
- 5.) What brings you here?
- 6.) Why do you enjoy professional wrestling shows?
- 7.) Do you come to professional wrestling events often?
- 8.) How long have you been a pro wrestling fan?
- 9.) In what ways do you get into or participate in pro wrestling events?
- 10.) Do you think pro wrestling events are true contests or are written and choreographed?
- 11.) If they do not: Why do you get involved in pro wrestling storylines as if you were a part of a real sporting event?
- 12.) Why do you think pro wrestling is so popular?

