

Wrestling Fans as Players, Performers as Characters

Conceptualizing WWE storytelling and production in
terms of Games and Play

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to position mediatized professional wrestling as a game, applying various play and game-related metaphors to its transmedia storytelling model, in an attempt to re-structure and understand the activities of WWE fans, performers, and executives. The introductory chapter gives an overview of the WWE and its play world called kayfabe, where the author justifies the conceptualization, linking WWE fan activities and WWE's transmedia storytelling to the concept of play and games. The first chapter conceptualizes WWE audiences as players of the game, applying the concept of playful identity to establish the double experience for fans immersed in play with respect to professional wrestling storytelling. The concept of player typologies establishes roles that fans can partake in, broadly defining their motivations for their engagement with the game. In the second chapter, the focus shifts to the wrestling ring used for staging playful transmedia narratives and WWE performers interpreted as characters in the game. I explore the performative potential of these narratives, taking into account the impact of real-life texts which influence the play world of kayfabe. The role of aestheticized WWE violence is also discussed in relation with playful engagement and the boundaries of the play. Case studies showcase how WWE narratives are shaped by real life and kayfabe, and demonstrate the participatory culture that transmedia storytelling engenders amongst its publics. The theoretical framework of the third chapter derives from the concept of Ecology of Games, framing WWE's production as a game from a cultural studies perspective, factoring the activities of various industries and societal spheres that hold a stake in the production of WWE narratives. This framing also speculates on narrative production processes being approached playfully. In the conclusion, the author explores how the WWE is changing its storytelling methods and production values due to restrictive measures in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing the WWE to experiment with available resources and technology to enhance its online and digital experience for WWE fans. Potential avenues for future research into mediatized professional wrestling are explored in the final section.

Keywords: Professional Wrestling, Playful Identity, Player typologies, Transmedia Storytelling, Ecology of Games

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	6
Research Question	7
Academic Relevance	8
Moving through mythology as the origin of modern wrestling scholarship.....	8
Academia on Professional Wrestling.....	9
Framing Mediatized Professional Wrestling in terms of Play and Games.....	11
WWE as a Game	11
The Play Aspect in WWE.....	14
Ambiguity in WWE Storytelling	16
CHAPTER 1: The Audience as Players of the WWE Game	19
Playful Identity.....	20
Dual Levels of Engagement.....	23
Self-Experience.....	24
Player Types	26
CHAPTER 2: The Wrestling Ring as a Stage for Playful Transmedia Storytelling, Performers as in-Game Characters.....	32
The Performers	34
Kinds of Performers.....	36
Wrestling as Sport and Spectacle	38
Storytelling in the Wrestling Ring.....	39
Aesthetics of WWE Violence and Catharsis.....	42
Choreographed Violence and its Allure for Players	42
Cathartic Properties of the WWE game	43
Overlap of Personas from Kayfabe and Real Life	44
Meta-Storytelling and Accommodating ‘Spoiler’ fans – Edge, Lita, and Matt Hardy	46
Playful Transmedia Storytelling comprising WWE’s Dominant Fiction	49
CHAPTER 3: Framing Wrestling Production as a Game	51
WWE’s Evolution into a Multimedia Enterprise.....	52
Applying the Ecology of Games metaphor to Wrestling Production	53
Exposing kayfabe and Getting the ‘F’ out	55
The Montreal Screwjob.....	57

Dominating Online Discourse	58
Cross-over Appeal	60
Broadcast Networks	61
The Impact of Politics on Wrestling Production	62
Gender Politics	63
The Social Game as Meta Game	64
Managing Social Responses to Wrestlers’ Wellbeing	64
CONCLUSION	69
Objectives for the Players, Performers, and the Game	69
Player Objectives	69
Performer Objectives	70
Objectives of WWE producers	70
Adapting to Changing Times	71
Edge vs. Randy Orton – “The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever”	74
Limitations of the thesis and corresponding suggestions for further research	75
Appendix -	77
I. CM Punk’s Pipe Bomb - Speculation through Uncertain Character Performance	77
II. Daniel Bryan’s YES Movement - Players as Supporting Characters in the Play World	79
III. The Undertaker’s <i>The Last Ride</i>	80
IV. Cinematic Matches	82
References	84

INTRODUCTION

“Back in the old days, though, kayfabe was much more; it was pro wrestling's real life Masquerade. Wrestlers, promoters, and everybody else involved with the business alike resorted to any means necessary to guard the secret that wrestling was rigged, from wrestlers roughing up any reporters who dared ask, "It's all fake, right?" to (alleged) death threats towards anybody who threatened to expose the secret, through contacts with the Mafia and other organized crime. Heels and faces weren't allowed to travel, eat, or be seen with their "enemies" in public, and changed in separate locker rooms. Wrestlers lived their gimmicks 24/7.”

- TVTropes.com, 2020

The quote above references the element of ‘kayfabe’, with regards to professional wrestling. Kayfabe – the alternate reality of wrestling – is a starting point that can be used to substantiate the conceptualization of professional wrestling in terms of play and games. The term ‘kayfabe’ “has its roots in carnival slang perhaps dating as far back as the 1800s” (Laine, 2018), situating its origins in carnivalesque play. Kayfabe underlines the ‘make-believe’ aspect of professional wrestling and has been researched in academic discourse (Smith, 2006). The word ‘mark’ is another wrestling term that can be sourced back to the carnival – as will be unpacked in the first chapter – referring to easy targets for dishonest carnival game operators to buy into their rigged game. Carnivalesque play can be traced back to the origins of professional wrestling. Play has been influential in the shaping of its industry. Given the main hypothesis of analyzing mediatized professional wrestling as a game, this section will provide an overview of the professional wrestling industry, and more specifically, the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). Professional wrestling is the amalgamation of theater, drama, and physical storytelling. Historically, the play world particular to the WWE, namely, kayfabe, was a well-guarded secret of the industry.

Kayfabe is what happens in the “magic circle” (Huizinga as defined by Castronova, 2005). The magic circle is a space where the normative obligations of the real world are suspended, replaced by the rules of the reality of a specific game world. According to Edward Castronova, the boundaries of this magic circle “can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world” (2005, 147). With regards to professional wrestling, this magic circle exists when kayfabe is in play, i.e. when the unfolding narratives are situated in the play world. The emphasis on retaining the integrity of this narrative universe used to be significant. Performers and other on-screen characters were obliged to continue the performance of their fictional personas to maintain the semblance of reality even outside the play environment. However, with the rise of social media and other platforms allowing the players access to the out-of-play personas of the performers, and the diverse production process of narratives of the WWE, the boundaries of WWE’s magic circle have been blurred. Regardless, kayfabe is an integral characteristic element of professional wrestling, an intricate mixture of play and out-of-play narratives that inform each other. It also requires cooperation among performers in the ring to further cement this illusion of this alternate, simultaneous reality as authentic and unscripted, as alluded to in existing literature on the topic (Jeffries, 2019, 1; Smith, 2006, 54-55). “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course” (Huizinga, 1949, 10). In professional wrestling, kayfabe marks the ideological boundaries of play.

Research Question

In this thesis, I explore how mediatized professional wrestling can be viewed as a game. This framing helps to re-structure and understand the activities of WWE fans, performers, and executives; and, through the application of various play and game concepts, this perspective can be used to gain insights into fan behavior, participatory culture via transmedia storytelling, production contexts, et cetera. I analyze all relevant parties of professional wrestling through this lens, identifying their respective goals for playing their roles, and how they act in an inter-dependent manner, in turn, contributing to the overall objective of the game itself. In the three chapters to follow, I focus on three different areas to explore this metaphor of wrestling as a game, aiming to find valuable aspects in this treatment for each. Broadly, the thesis focuses on the overarching question:

- How can mediatized professional wrestling be conceptualized as a game and what can be gained from it?

Then there are more specific questions pertaining to the subsequent chapters:

- How can WWE audiences be positioned as players of the WWE game to better understand their performance as fans, and further, to consider their activities through player typologies?
- Can WWE's playful transmedia storytelling instigate participatory culture amongst professional wrestling fans, leading to their palpable influence on narratives, and what roles do WWE performers play as characters in the game?
- How can WWE's production contexts be framed through the concept of an Ecology of Games to inform activities of WWE executives and other relevant individuals?
- How do WWE's creative and business decisions in response to disruptive, restrictive guidelines stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic change the rules of the WWE game and inform the game and play metaphors?

To answer these questions, I will apply various game and play metaphors such as playful identity, the double experience of play, player typologies, playful storytelling, and ecology of games to highlight different facets of mediatized professional wrestling.

The thesis will be driven by the metaphors of game and play to offer ways to understand the phenomenon of mediatized professional wrestling. However, “[metaphors] propose a way of understanding something in the terms of another; the analogy distorts the phenomenon being described, by highlighting those features most aligned with what it is being compared to” (Gillespie, 2017). For this reason, depending on the context, I use multiple metaphors to drive the thesis. I hope to establish some arguments that open up new ways to look at the industry, bringing to the fore the intricate complexities of the phenomenon, sometimes at the expense of exposing imperfections of the metaphor.

Academic Relevance

Moving through mythology as the origin of modern wrestling scholarship

French theorist Roland Barthes was among the first scholars to take an academic interest in the professional wrestling phenomenon, with a chapter in his book *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972), originally published in 1957. The focus of Barthes' chapter is on "the sum of spectacles" (Ibid., 16) of professional wrestling (Ibid., 16) acting out mythologies through exaggerated modes of storytelling, and the role of the wrestler – "the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him" (Ibid.), linking existing function of "grandiloquence" to that of "ancient theater" (Ibid.).

Wrestling, at the time, was primarily defined by the portrayal of mythological stories, such as 'patriot vs. foreigner' – seen in wrestling characters of that period, such as The Patriot, Mr. America, Sgt. Slaughter, 'The All American' Lex Luger, Canadian Bret Hart facing off against their antagonists such as Iranian wrestler The Iron Sheik, Nikolai Volkoff from the U.S.S.R., Yokozuna from Japan, et cetera. Other mythological archetypes heavily explored in the wrestling world include 'David vs. Goliath' and 'Rebel vs. The Corporation', applied to the underlying conflict of 'hero vs. villain' and 'good vs. evil'. These culturally-resonant portrayals have invited academic discourse on the cultural roots of professional wrestling, such as Dan Glenday's "Professional Wrestling as Culturally Embedded Spectacle in five core countries: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan" (2013).

With professional wrestling storytelling modes becoming more interactive, there has been a shift from mythologies as stories, to the act of ritual, i.e. the situation in which mythologies are performed and actualized (cf. Brondin on Gadamer, 2001). In the modern professional wrestling landscape, these mythologies are re-enacted through ritualized play. The WWE, formerly known as WWF (World Wrestling Federation) and WWWF (World Wide Wrestling Federation), has been in operation since the 1960s, with a rich history of fictional story lines. WWE history serves as a collection of images, audio-visuals, narratives featuring concerned wrestlers which collectively constitute the mythology of the WWE. It can be argued that all of wrestling's kayfabe history accounts for wrestling mythology, i.e. "a set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious" (Lexico, 2020). Professional wrestling is a "spectacle of excess" (Barthes, 1972, 15), the performance of which is, by design, exaggerated and based in fiction, and creates a set of stories and beliefs for its audience. There are established origin stories for every facet of WWE, such as wrestling characters (wrestlers), wrestling maneuvers, match types, shows, pay-per-view events, television personalities, slogans, et cetera. These pieces of historical information are readily available to be showcased and used to serve a future narrative. The archive of WWE's wrestling history thus activates the potential of historical reference and nostalgia to re-contextualize or lend an enhanced degree of familiarity or credibility to a mythological narrative that is currently unfolding, or one that is yet to be executed.

WWE executive and wrestler Paul Levesque, a.k.a. Triple H, speaking of the character development and storytelling in WWE, treats the WWE as a sub-cultural phenomenon, claiming, "nobody in any form of entertainment or sport has put the number of characters that have transcended generations, make you feel something, taken you back in time to that moment when you were the kid at Madison Square Garden watching [Hulk] Hogan pop out of the Camel Clutch

and blowing your mind” (2018). His wife, WWE Chief Brand Officer Stephanie McMahon, who is the daughter of Chairman Vince McMahon, states that WWE’s main objective is all about “creating these memories and these moments that last a lifetime” (2018) - similar to the transmedia storytelling in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) (Canavan, 2018).

Given these goal statements, it is not far-fetched to claim that WWE places emphasis on showcasing parts of history that gain traction in popular culture, standing the test of time, making for what Stephanie McMahon calls memories and moments which last a lifetime for the players, and also anyone who interacts with popular culture imagery or any kind of representation on social media, memes, cross-platform promotion, et cetera (Stonebarger, 2011). Another outcome of this reliance on history manifests when popular former wrestlers are brought back and booked to partake in marquee matches on the biggest shows – a pattern that has been criticized by sports journalists (Stynes, 2018; Bartlett, 2019). “The fantasy is almost always better than reality, but fantasies persist. Trotting out heroes from the past will always have a place in WWE’s spectacle” (Dilbert, 2014).

WWE also engages in spreading select portions of its history through these strategies to establish certain images, moments, and narratives as mythologies. An example of re-focusing on past narratives and their various elements is witnessed when WWE uploads full matches from its archive onto the WWE YouTube channel, usually featuring past and present performers. The views, likes/dislikes, comments, and average watch-time of those matches gives the company an indication of the amount of traction those re-enactments of mythological narratives through particular wrestlers, match types, and narratives can still generate in the current audience. Well-received, popular narratives, over time, become part of WWE folklore, which then serve as a benchmark for future stories to compare to and endeavor to surpass. This ritualized strategy of producing and giving exposure to select history allows players to build a frame of reference from the past, or, for new players, to build a reference to the past. This also strengthens the cultural integrity of the group it is referring to, justifying the prominence of the stories in this system. Thus, mythologies play a significant role in the production of WWE narratives. Throughout this thesis, I will be studying several story arcs, matches, and rivalries from the game perspective.

Initial academic discourse on professional wrestling treated it as a curiosity, but the recent trajectory in wrestling scholarship indicates that this kind of popular theater is being taken seriously, evident in professional wrestling discourse with relation to gender, storytelling, health, self-image, et cetera.

Academia on Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling has not been conceived as a game in academic discourse. Play-related terminology exists in the discourse, but has seldom been systematically developed beyond a few pioneering studies (cf. Toepfer, 2011; Jeffries, 2019; Ingram, 2017). Wrestling has been a relatively marginalized concept in media and culture studies. However, in the past two decades, professional wrestling scholarship has received more attention and has become much more numerous and diverse (Jones et al, 2018). In my work, I wish to highlight the aesthetic, thematic, and operational similarities that wrestling shares with games and play. The chairman of the WWE Vince McMahon coined the term ‘sports entertainment’ for marketing purposes, distancing professional wrestling from regulations which would typically apply to competitive sports, which has also contributed to wrestling operating as a **transmedia phenomenon**

(Sciaretta, 2019; Ford, 2016) conducting its operations, reaching its audiences on various social platforms, contributing to a “participatory culture” (Reihard and Olson, 2019; cf. Jenkins, 2006) among wrestling fans. The role of social media in the working of professional wrestling is growing. This thesis will explore how it impacts wrestling as a sport, but also as a media phenomenon.

The central hypothesis allows us to analyze – 1) the ways in which players interact with a pre-determined theatrical sporting event, 2) the different kinds of relationships that players develop with the genre of professional wrestling, and 3) the numerous negotiations between the various domains that factor into the production of wrestling narratives. The fans are the consumers and interactors of the mediatized professional wrestling industry. Scholar Sam Ford has explored the various platforms that fans are afforded to follow the various experiences, or ‘transmedia story’ (Ford, 2016, 178) that WWE offers, claiming “fans can watch a match, a show, a feud, all as part of the full ‘soap opera’ of the WWE Universe (177). Here, Ford compares wrestling to another televisual genre; in this thesis, through the comparison to games and play, I aim to highlight aspects of WWE that are not readily apparent. Ford also highlights how WWE infuses texts from real life into its storyworld, leading to ‘**narrative confusion**’ (179). **Relationships that the fans develop** with the play world of kayfabe are further concretized by historical contexts that accumulate over time, when “intelligible characters carry out the core human struggles we all face in exaggerated form” (Ford, 2019, 120). Professional wrestling’s connection to theatric modes has been referenced as well (Laine, 2017; Archer et al, 1998; Sehmy, 2002).

Fans have been conceptualized as co-performers in the transmedia storytelling model of WWE (Oglesby, 2017). The role of social media in aiding the shift of WWE’s texts on a transmedial platform has cited in recent works on the topic (Sciaretta, 2019, 562), along with the institutionalization of informed fans into the ‘media fandom’ of professional wrestling (Toepfer, 2011). These paratextual and intermedial feedback loops are a result of the multi-platform presence of the WWE, which factor heavily into the production of narratives, cumulatively forming the transmedia story.

Production of wrestling content is determined by several factors. The main facets explored in this thesis are – a) production values which have been successful in the past, b), and the qualitative and quantitative feedback of the players, and c) regulations imposed by various stakeholders (such as local governments, broadcast partners, target audiences, sponsors, expectations of investors, et cetera). There are a few studies on wrestling productions, focusing on the emotional toll that the occupation takes on its performers due to the high work rate and intensity investment wrestling demands (Smith, 2008). Wrestling production studies have also focused on gender equality (Serrano, 2016). The existing scholarship is concentrated on the status of performers. Complementary to these perspectives on wrestling production, adopting a more macro perspective on wrestling production, I conceptualize the ecosystem around wrestling as an ecology of games (Long, 1958), produced in constant negotiation with numerous other games that are in play, determining the physical performance, dramatization, implemented symbolism, and social contexts embedded in professional wrestling narratives.

The players and prime consumers of this game of wrestling, i.e. the fans, develop different levels and kinds of associations with the game, giving rise to various player types. Negotiation between the value systems and aesthetics of both everyday life and the play world (kayfabe) affects the nature of player participation, fluctuating between their spectatorial and participatory functions

(Toepfer, 2011). The scope for player participation in the game has been expanded by social media and interactive public discourse, i.e. the fans are influencing the production of wrestling narratives (Norman, 2017) by voicing their feedback on public platforms. This influence of informed players has enhanced the performative potential of their role as fans, in that, these fans are able to communicate their personal expectations, and also uphold societal norms and personal value systems, while considering the production processes of wrestling narratives. These real associations with a narrative universe (kayfabe) and motivations developed within play allow us to understand and dissect how **participative entertainment can provide value and meaning** for the audiences who interact with these modes. These aspects will be elaborated on in the chapter summaries.

Extending the primary hypothesis of treating mediatized wrestling as a game, and applying it to the media production side of the professional wrestling industry can contextualize the numerous moving parts that play into the culture of scripting fictional narratives. Some of these aspects of professional wrestling have been addressed in academic discourse (Zolides, 2019), distinguishing wrestling from competitive sports and other fictional texts. Adopting the game metaphor to analyze the scripting process of professional wrestling highlights – i) the inter-dependence between play and out-of-play worlds, ii) the various modes that facilitate the interaction between the two, and iii) the power relations that determine risk-reward and negotiation aspects of wrestling production.

Framing Mediatized Professional Wrestling in terms of Play and Games

Before discussing the game of professional wrestling and how it achieves this distinction, it is important to contextualize professional wrestling from the perspectives of both games and play. Games and play are not mutually exclusive, but there are different aspects of both that are present in professional wrestling.

WWE as a Game

In this section I briefly introduce the WWE and its operation, before commenting on my framing of the WWE as a game. Professional wrestling is an industry whose main function is to provide **commercial entertainment** to its fans, executing fictional story lines featuring performers who partake in wrestling matches inside the wrestling ring. A salient feature of WWE programming is that it is ceaseless; there is no off-season. Multiple shows are hosted every week of every year. The WWE game never truly ends or stops. One main rule of the professional wrestling game is the fact that the outcomes of matches are predetermined, the lines of verbal segments are largely scripted.

Since professional wrestling is not a real sport, it is predominantly critiqued on the literal performance of scripted narratives in the form of wrestling matches and verbal segments, not as a legitimate combat sport. The objective of the fans watching is a satisfying experience, with regards to storytelling, quality of matches, verbal segments, relatable characters, et cetera. The **primary function** of the WWE is to provide commercial entertainment to its fans. The WWE experience is also fueled by ancillary narratives and out-of-play story lines that serve to support main plots and to entertain the fans. Along with this primary function, there are numerous

supplementary functions of wrestling, such as – social activism, promoting real-world ethics, upholding value systems of the ever-changing outlook of its worldwide audiences, catering to the welfare of its performers, inculcating the feedback of its fanbase into its active narratives, diversifying promotion strategies on social media, scheduling events of multiple media platforms.

Professional wrestling is physical storytelling, staged in the format of sporting competition. In this thesis, I treat professional wrestling as a game. The WWE creates its own fictional universe called kayfabe. The fictional universe is constructed, scripted, and unfolds concurrent to real life where the players reside. All kayfabe events are part of the three main shows *Raw*, *NXT*, and *SmackDown*; these shows are majorly pre-determined – including lines of dialogue, character traits of performers, allegiances formed between performers, signature moves, winners of matches, the time assigned to specific matches, et cetera. In the play world, wrestlers perform their kayfabe personas for the players to witness. This also culminates in a different nature of competition between performers, one which is determined less by their win-loss record, and more by the response they generate from the audience, and the quality of the portrayal of their kayfabe identities. Judgments on these matters are made primarily by authority figures, and also by the audience who demonstrate their approval through quantifiable methods such as television ratings, online hits, merchandise sales, et cetera, and also through their live reactions and analytical discourse on various platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, et cetera. As of this writing, its followers on popular platforms include more than 64 million YouTube subscribers, 11 million Twitter followers, 21 million Instagram followers, and 44 million Facebook followers. In turn, WWE also hosts shows that are not directly under the kayfabe umbrella, i.e. these shows are **meta shows** not strictly guided by WWE’s fictional universe. Examples of such shows include *WWE 24*, *WWE Untold*, *WWE Ride Along*, et cetera, usually chronicling real-life events of the performers and interviewees, or taking the audience behind the scenes of some important kayfabe story lines.

My treatment of WWE as a game is broadly based on the definition of games stipulated by Espen Aarseth – “Games are facilitators that structure player behavior, and whose main purpose is enjoyment” (2014, 130), which positions the WWE fans as players in this framing. I will support this conceptualization with investigations of other definitions of games. The emphasis on player behavior is essential to contextualize the purpose and function of the players. The enjoyment referenced in Aarseth’s definition is the primary drive of the players who engage with the various interfaces of the game. I will delve into these modes of enjoyment and the outcomes of this drive in the subsequent chapters.

Other definitions of games include: “an activity that one engages in for amusement or fun” (Lexico, 2020). The players of the WWE game, i.e. the audience, engage for amusement and fandom, to see entertaining stories develop around the wrestling medium. Games have also been defined as the “socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes” (Malaby, 2007, 96). The WWE allows for its players to conceive of potential outcomes based on established narrative tropes, enabling the use of foreshadowing, for example. Wrestling narratives are all scripted, making the entire presentation contrived. For example, it can be expected that near the conclusion of a story arc, usually, the heroic character achieves victory over his nemesis, to give the players the moment of euphoria that the narratives subminally promise by introducing obstacles in his path. But this expectation makes it possible to mislead the player, to add another wrinkle to the story. There is still a lot up to the

interpretation of the players. Victories in wrestling can be achieved through underhanded tactics or otherwise unconvincing means – winning via disqualification, assistance from allies, fluke maneuvers, et cetera are very common, especially for the villainous characters. How any given performer achieves any outcome continues to further his narrative, cementing or constructing his position in the eyes of the players. This interpretation of the performer’s behavior, and to a larger extent, the performance itself, informs the players’ response to the character.

In *Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers*, author Dave Grey proposes five components that make a game – game space, boundaries, rules of interaction, artifacts, and goal (Grey et al, 2010, 1-2). Game space here refers to an “alternative world” (ibid., 1) that games create. The game space of professional wrestling can be assigned to the cumulative transmedia space in which the game operates. This would include texts from the play world of kayfabe and also texts from real life, which together contribute to the WWE’s transmedia story. The boundaries with respect to time are set by the weekly WWE shows *Raw*, *NXT*, and *SmackDown*, while the wrestling ring serves as the location for performers to work matches, and deliver lines of dialog as part of promos (promotional segments) or kayfabe talk shows. These boundaries of the overarching WWE game are not rigid, as I will be detailing in the section dedicated to the ambiguity in this game.

Grey characterizes rules of interaction as when “players agree to abide by rules that define the way the game world operates” (ibid., 1). These rules pertaining to the WWE game are not outright explained or limited to particular parameters, but the possibilities for players to interact with the game are to attend live shows, watch it from home, to get access to special shows available on the WWE Network service, conduct discussions on online platforms, form networks that extend to insiders of the game such as the producers, executives, or performers themselves, et cetera.

The next component to consider is artifact, described as “objects that hold information about the game, [...] a way to track progress and to maintain a picture of the game’s current status” (ibid., 2; Milutinovic, 2017). The WWE employs a self-referential model in storytelling, i.e. it contextualizes current story arcs and sets up future performances based on past arcs. For example, every episode of *Raw* is followed by a YouTube video, containing the ‘Top 10 moments’, while every new episode is preceded by a ‘5 things to know before tonight’s Raw’ video. The WWE website constantly updates its feed with results from shows, news about the upcoming events, promotional content featuring marquee performers, information about championships, merchandise sales, et cetera. Additionally, numerous sports news and wrestling news websites are posting content about news and rumors regarding the WWE. Players organize online forums to discuss current narratives, treatment of various performers, do fantasy booking. These are but a few of the examples of how the game effectively conveys a picture of the game’s current status, allowing players to track the progression of story lines both in the play world (kayfabe) and outside of it (real-life).

Lastly, we arrive at the goal of the players. Grey writes, “players must have a way to know when the game is over, [...] that is understood and agreed to by all players” (2010, 2). This component is not present in the case of WWE, because the game never ends, and has several platforms. It can be said that the kayfabe portion of the game ends at the end of *Raw*, *NXT*, or *SmackDown*, but the social aspect of the WWE game always remains active on online media platforms. I will address the objectives of players in more detail in the following chapters.

The WWE experience for its fans, due to its many game-like features, has prompted me to adopt this lens for the thesis. Following up on my definition of the WWE as a game, **fans can be understood as players of the WWE game**. There are two broad classifications of professional wrestling fans based on the nature of their relationship with the game – a) casual fans who think wrestling is a real sport, believing in the authenticity of the WWE game (‘marks’, as referended in the first section of the thesis), and b) critics who analyze the performance from an informed perspective (‘smarks’ or smart ‘marks’). The former relationship is similar to the dynamic between the fans and performers of spectator-sports like football or hockey; the latter category, comprised of informed players who are privy to the scripted nature of professional wrestling and the practicalities involved in its production. These players negotiate between their spectatorial and participatory functions. Informed players assess the performance of the game on the bases of quality of story-telling, social acceptance of fictional narratives, identity performance by characters in the fictional world of kayfabe, whether or not the performers are being utilized effectively by the WWE, upholding the legacy of the sport (and entertainment) of professional wrestling, attendance figures at live events, television ratings, financial performance, et cetera.

The Play Aspect in WWE

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga characterizes play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.” Play is not connected with “material interest” and “no profit can be gained by it”, proceeding “within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.” Lastly, Huizinga mentions that “play promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means” (1949, 13).

Professional wrestling fans are the ones who play the game. They consciously engage with the wrestling experience, getting immersed in their roles, without any material interest or profit generated. The primary rule of wrestling being fixed defines the play situation; the number of fans who are aware of this rule, i.e. ‘smarks’, constitute a heavy majority of the WWE fanbase (Debate.org, 2020), and contribute to discourses of wrestling news and commentaries comprise the Internet Wrestling Community (Pro Wrestling Fandom, 2020).

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois defines play on similar parameters, delineating play as a free activity, separate from real life, make-believe, unproductive, governed by rules, and uncertain. About rules, he states, play is “under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts” (1958, 10). In wrestling, these rules are evident in the very nature of kayfabe, where an entirely different world concurrently exists within real-life. The rules are multi-faceted. Some are stated outright, like rules and stipulations of different kinds of matches; and some rules are implied, like not mentioning rival wrestling companies, using particular vernacular and avoiding terminology (for example, performers are called ‘superstars’ or ‘entertainers’ in lieu of ‘wrestlers’) that is deemed inappropriate for the brand or certain demographics, thus damaging the illusion of kayfabe on the televised program. Over time, players accept these rules as given, and often are unaware of being guided by them, thus making their participation more involuntary and organic – this is significantly true for ‘marks’.

Caillois also comments on the unproductive nature of play, using that aspect to create a distinction between players and “workers” (1958, 6), the latter being the wrestlers in this case. The workers attain their status due to the consideration of prize, salary, or title, which sets them apart from the players, who don’t materially benefit from their engagement.

About make-believe, Caillois writes that play is “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life” (1958, 10). The ‘special awareness’ referenced here is the aesthetic lens that informed players, a.k.a. smarks, perceive the wrestling product through. The added knowledge regarding the medium transforms the spectatorial experience into a critical exercise. This distinction between the two main types of wrestling fandom has redefined the process of scriptwriting, primarily because the product will be evaluated not just as fictional stories with which the players can relate to at an individual level, but meta-narratives that may potentially satisfy the expectations of players who are familiar with the general possibilities and tropes that are typical to the wrestling genre – thus positioning them to digest said narratives from a historical perspective, setting the standard that serves as the mode of analysis for quality story-telling.

Caillois comments on the relationship between rules and reality, saying that “rules themselves create fiction” (1958, 8). This is the basis of his claim that “games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe” (1958, 8). Frissen et al also allude to the choice that players have in *Homo Ludens* 2.0. “We know when we are playing, and when we are not.” (2015, 24). While this does imply, in the context of professional wrestling, that the player can choose whether or not to suspend disbelief and perceive the product as true competition, it does not explicitly address the selective application of a player’s knowledge (‘selective perception’) – a negotiation between experiencing what the medium pretends to be, and what it actually is. For instance, it does not accommodate the option that smarks have to enjoy a simple wrestling match as true competition, while simultaneously possessing the knowledge and historical reference to evaluate a given wrestler’s performance from a critical lens. A player could also take any given match as a sample of what maneuvers WWE is ‘allowing’ any given wrestler to perform. This also serves as a mode for players to evaluate the utilization of a performer, in light of what that performer is capable of doing and what he is allowed to do. Caillois’ claim does not accommodate the situation of simultaneous experience and immersion by the player as a spectator *and* a critic, the simultaneous perception of both aspects. Thus, the game metaphor applied to WWE may not always satisfy all the qualifiers set by all definitions of games and play due to the dynamic and complex nature of the professional wrestling phenomenon.

This brings me to the remaining characteristic element of play that Caillois outlines – **uncertainty**. He states that play is uncertain, “the course of which cannot be determined beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative” (1958, 9). It is correct to state that players are not aware of how a certain story line will unfold; however, that is not the kind of uncertainty that I wish to highlight. The traditional story-telling framework allows for two predictable forms of player engagement – spectatorial and critical. Story lines that play out over a few weeks are performed and resolved in the ring by two or more performers; these narratives fall under the cultural gaze of the players to bestow upon it a degree of relatability. The smart player is aware that all narratives are pre-determined, which informs his ability for the aforementioned simultaneous perception. He is aware that WWE’s three main weekly shows are situated in kayfabe, and the rest are more meta, based either in real life or somewhere in the middle. I explore this aspect further in Chapter 2.

Awareness on the part of the spectator, suggestions from the performers, and the aesthetic of the platform construct the framework for selective narrative fidelity, one where the player can be faithful to whichever domain is being showcased – kayfabe or real-life. In such a framework, the enforcement of uncertainty is the primary tactic to create the impression that the magic circle is being broken. In WWE, this can be achieved by making the fan think that kayfabe is being broken while the game is situated in the play world. The transgression, in this potential situation, lies not in the action of the player; the game can incept the idea in the mind of the player that the game might be cheating itself. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that “the real subject of the game is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him in to play, and keeps him there is the game itself” (1989, 106). This aligns with Gadamer’s aforementioned claim that the subject of the game is the game itself. In the context of wrestling, uncertainty regarding the scripted nature or the ‘fakeness’ of the presentation is generated by making the player receptive to the event in which the normative boundaries of the medium are challenged, and the content is seemingly not filtered by the script.

Ambiguity in WWE Storytelling

There lies an **essential ambiguity in professional wrestling** that is similar to the ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play has been described as a process of convergence (Toepfer, 2011), traversing the various binaries such as fans-scholars, producers-consumers, et cetera. “In an increasingly mediated environment, play is the most accurate way to account for the processes of media audiences who behave in various, inconsistent, and complex ways depending on the text/context/subjectivity. Play brings all of the contradictions together, a framework of media audiences that is simultaneously useful and inclusive” (8). One of the primary aspects that I will explore in Chapter 1 is the increasingly inclusive role that the fans, i.e. the players, are taking on. Professional wrestling, being a play activity, also inherits the essential ambiguity that is present in play. The ambiguity of mediatized wrestling focuses on: a) ambiguities in the scripted narrative (incorporating real-world references by deliberately affording different interpretations); and b) epistemic ambiguity (borrowing elements of sports, media events, ritualistic social gathering).

Wrestling characters are called superstars or entertainers, instead of wrestlers. This choice echoes WWE’s emphasis on the entertainment portion of their presentation. The requirements from a wrestler employed by WWE have diversified due to the enhanced presence on social media that the company has established. WWE extends narratives on its social platforms, using their performers as actors to play out the narrative in question. Wrestlers are constantly engaging in identity performance, especially on online social platforms, fluctuating between their play world personas and their real-life identities. This aspect is also highlighted on the WWE website providing information from the realm of real-life and also kayfabe.

WWE includes “news stories and rumors that circulate about the personal lives of its performers in the story for their characters – making those “real” stories yet another text in the transmedia pro wrestling story,” (Ford, 2016) an aspect I explore in more depth in Chapter 2. These texts are layered, and are designed to attract the player’s attention by either creating interest or doubt about a fictional narrative featuring a performer’s kayfabe identity or appealing to the player’s innate desire to have a look ‘behind the curtain’, by portraying a performer’s real-life identity. In the latter case, the player gets the feeling that he is interacting with the actor performing the character he sees on television. However, it is not announced explicitly which identity of the

performer is active at any given moment. The WWE transmedia pro wrestling story, as Ford calls it, is constantly informed by texts from real life and the play world.

I discussed how definitions of games and play can be majorly applied to the operation of WWE's storytelling. But given the complexities of the medium and the various options afforded to the players for interacting and interpreting the rules of the game, I propose that there is no rigid structure to this game. The function of the WWE game is up to the players to define according to their interests and purposes for interacting with it.

“Games could be made to pervade the lives of players in a different way: by blurring the *contextual* aspect of the rules, while keeping the other aspects of the rules fixed. This could be achieved by using ambiguity, such that players can interpret the rules in any way they choose, and could lead to gameplay situations which could be more easily interpreted within the players' everyday lives” (Dansey et al, 2011, 1).

Ambiguity, in the WWE transmedia framework, constantly fuels player immersion and speculation. By ambiguity, I am referring to the potential overlaps between everyday life and the play world (Ford, 2019), and evident uncertainty regarding which domain wrestling is operating in. There are many instances of out-of-play incidents being enacted in kayfabe, or a performer basing his kayfabe persona on his real-life personality. No clear distinction can be made between where texts from real-life end and texts from kayfabe begin. The WWE game unfolds on various platforms. The weekly television shows *Raw*, *NXT*, and *SmackDown* account for the progression of the narratives based in the play world of kayfabe. When the show ends, the WWE game shifts to the platform of social media, where players discuss the program and voice their opinions, while also having the chance to engage with meta or ‘behind the curtain’ shows that are not explicitly situated within the scope of play, i.e. shows are not directly part of the show that is broadcast on television; this kind of content can be used to further kayfabe narratives, but also might showcase performers and online personalities performing their out-of-play, everyday life personas. The WWE Network's original show *The Bump* is one such example where performers and hosts cover topics such as ongoing wrestling narratives, personal lives, popular culture references, promotional content, et cetera. In addition to this, performers also engage in social media activity on various platforms without always making clear which persona they are channeling, or performers make public appearances where their real-life personas are more dominant. All these texts, regardless of being sourced from kayfabe or real life, become part of WWE's transmedia story and keep adding to it endlessly. The WWE game, and especially its social aspect, problematizes boundaries of the game and redefining rules of interaction with the game, with the players able to interpret rules in multiple ways.

As a performance-driven activity, wrestling lies between sport and entertainment, hence its branding as ‘sports entertainment’ (WWE, 2020). Over the years, with the surge in the popularity of wrestling, this ambiguity has become more apparent. The play world of wrestling integrates aspects of everyday life and fiction, serving as a relatable environment to the audience. A thematic undertone that constitutes the aforementioned ambiguity of wrestling is its **negotiation** with fictional and non-fictional narratives. It is a **collective transmedial practice**, featuring sporting drama akin to the SuperBowl, and also biblical references, story line tropes from novels and films (TVTropes.org, 2020). Wrestler Chris Jericho has cited *Game of Thrones* as an influence on his story line with fellow performer Kevin Owens in 2018 (Inside The Ropes, 2018); the *WrestleMania 25* contest between The Undertaker and Shawn Michaels was portrayed

as a battle between darkness and light. The various elements of wrestling are not organized in any particular hierarchy; its theatrical, sports, meta, and cinematic game elements are presented under the 'sports entertainment' label, described by WWE Chairman and CEO, Vince McMahon.

“Even though we call ourselves “Sports Entertainment” because of the athleticism involved, the keyword in that phrase is “Entertainment”. The WW[E] extends far beyond the strict confines of sports presentation into the wide-open environment of broad-based entertainment. We borrow from such program niches like soap-operas, like “The Days of Our Live”, or, music videos such as those on MTV, daytime talk-shows like “Jerry Springer” and [...] cartoons like “The King of The Hill” on FOX, sitcoms like “Seinfeld,” and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment. [...] This is a conscious effort on our part to open the creative envelope in order to entertain you in a more contemporary manner” (McMahon, 1997).

Professional wrestling borrows from all its constituents without explicitly showcasing any one of those elements. This further cements the ambiguity of the resultant mixed domain that wrestling propagates. The ambiguity in play informs how wrestling audiences perceive and interact with the experience. Ambiguity also fuels speculation and various interpretations from players, often engendering a higher level of immersion, testing the 'smartness' and self-esteem of the players who pride themselves on being aware of the inner workings of the WWE production process. Conceptualizing mediatized wrestling as a game facilitates insights into its mechanical framework –level of player/fan immersion, aesthetics and production values, et cetera, and cultural ramifications that could otherwise go unnoticed or unanalyzed.

CHAPTER 1: The Audience as Players of the WWE Game

In this first chapter, I will be delving deeper into the role of the players, i.e. the audience, with respect to their levels of engagement, goals, modes of expression, and critique on the game. The methodology for this chapter will be based on **netnographic research** (Kozinets, 2015), including interaction between members of the audience on public forums like YouTube comment sections and Reddit forums. Public conversation between fans on digital platforms is the primary mode of communication, which I will use to highlight the motivations of specific kinds of fans and how their activities resemble those of a player invested in a game. This will demonstrate the workings of two dominant groups of wrestling fandom called ‘marks’ and ‘smarks’ – with these players classified based on the knowledge, or lack thereof, that professional wrestling is staged. The audience, collectively known as the WWE Universe, functions as critics (‘smarks’, or ‘smart marks’) and observers (‘marks’) of WWE content. The speculated origin of the term ‘mark’ comes from the practice in carnival games in which “dishonest carnival game operators found someone who they could entice to keep playing their rigged game, [and] then ‘mark[ed]’ the individual by patting their back with a hand that had chalk on it” (Reddit, 2018), thus allowing fellow grifters to identify their ‘mark’ – someone gullible they could easily swindle. Marks, in professional wrestling, are the ones who are enticed by the wrestling production to believe that it is a real sport, whereas smart marks are aware of the scriptedness.

The fans are increasingly becoming an important part of the presentation due to the diversification of their role. The fans-as-players comprise the only aspect of WWE production that is not explicitly scripted, even though story lines are largely aimed at a particular “implied player” (Aarseth, 2014, 132), i.e. the kind of player the WWE caters to during the scripting process. But audience is not obligated to react to the events in kayfabe in any particular way. The more influential the role of the player, the larger the scope from them to react more ‘smartly’. Social media has allowed for players to have more access to insider information and to the lives of WWE personalities outside the ring, outside kayfabe. This gives rise to more smarks, who “think of themselves as smart because of their increased awareness of the stories *behind* the stories that take place on the show” (Jeffries, 2019, 139-140).

The carnivalesque theatrics of professional wrestling (Canella, 2016; Pro Wrestling Studies, 2018) and its likeness to a spectacle (Barthes, 1972) allow ‘marks’ and ‘smarks’ to play the rigged game of professional wrestling. Both categories of fans develop playful identities (Frissen et al, 2015) to engage with the game, understanding the levels of said engagement in order to develop specific roles in their play. These are some of the motivations for the conceptualization of wrestling fans as players which will be expounded in the following sections of this chapter.

The behavior of smart players is informed by this growing knowledge of the industry and the various factors that contribute to narrative production. In turn, these players who are equipped with this knowledge are able to ascertain to some extent the possible outcomes of certain narrative arcs, and also the purpose behind it. For example, lots of critics and fans were opposed-yet-understanding to WWE’s decision to book returning veteran wrestler Goldberg to win the WWE Universal Championship in the build-up to the biggest event on the WWE calendar,

WrestleMania (The Straight Shooters, 2020; Cultaholic, 2020). The critique stemmed from the fact that it was another instance where a young, up-and-coming star was booked to lose to an aging, established, more popular wrestler returning to occupy a marquee spot on the premier show of the company. Reception to this decision mainly ranged from – “You don’t need another old guy beating one of your top stars, again” (Straight Shooters, 2020) to – “I get it. [...] This is a company selling a product to as many people as possible” (Cultaholic, 2020); the former perspective rejects the compromise on current stars, while the latter accepts the star power of Goldberg as a justification. These comments offer, respectively, critique and the possible rationale behind the WWE’s decision to make an aging veteran Universal Champion. Both demonstrate an “attention to how the machinery of storytelling works as an additional level of engagement beyond the storyworld itself” (Mittell, 2009) - what Jason Mittell refers to as an “operational aesthetic” (Ibid.).

In the modern era of wrestling, audience engagement is dynamic, and social media facilitates many avenues for fans to get a look ‘behind the curtain’. It is impossible to preserve the dichotomy between fiction and everyday life. With the existence of widely-followed sports news outlets, dirt sheets, personal social media accounts of performers and authority figures, it simply is not conceivable to prevent the players from being aware that the game maintains a separate play world for its fictional narratives.

Players can also gain information about the play world’s construction and sustenance. It is no surprise, therefore, that texts from real life are fast becoming an increasingly important driver of the texts in kayfabe (Ford, 2016, 179). For instance, the personal life of legendary wrestler The Undertaker, renowned for preserving kayfabe throughout his entire career and keeping his real-life extremely private, was integrated into a story arc in the weeks preceding 2020’s *WrestleMania 36*.

The co-performance of wrestling fans in the WWE’s transmedia storytelling model (Oglesby, 2017) is visible in the behavior of smart players, who equip themselves with various choices due to their knowledge of the existence of the play world. These choices allow them to discover their preferred roles (Goffman, 1959) and execute them in the game space. The game space, or the transmedia space, is bigger than the play world of kayfabe. It is sourced by the cumulative influence of real-life texts and kayfabe texts that are produced with respect to the WWE and comprise its transmedia story. In such situations, players construct a playful identity which can be activated when they are situated in the play world, and also beyond. In the following sections, I will be explaining the concept of playful identity, later applying it to the WWE game. This will be followed by a discussion about the dual-levels of engagement that players apply to their experience, leading to how they develop different approaches and goals with respect to the game.

Playful Identity

In this section, I will define the concept of playful identity and afterward position it in relation to professional wrestling. Playful identity serves as a lens through which players assess the game which acts as a foundation for understanding the player’s attitudes towards the game.

The definition of playful identity begins with an understanding of playfulness. Playfulness is becoming a progressively relevant part of our everyday lives. In contemporary culture, the ludification of human identity is an ever-present phenomenon. The process of ludification

“analyses the surrounding culture and its daily manifestations through the lens of playfulness and games” (Dippel and Fizek, 2017, 4). Playfulness has invaded our daily routines to an extent that play, no longer restricted to childhood, has become a life-long attitude, as claimed by Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He argues that ‘the mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly’ (Bauman, 1995, 99). Similarly, in professional wrestling, the player has to be willing to accept the various platforms and domains of the game and interact through his playful inclinations.

In *Playful Identities: Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Frissen et al set the parameters of playful identity in relation to the moral obligations people experience and develop in everyday life. “A playful identity characterizes someone’s ludic activities without immediately discussing the valuing and moralizing practices arising from these activities.” (Frissen et al, 2015, 111)

Playful identity answers the question: who am I in relation to this world? In wrestling, this aspect is evident in players’ encounters with kayfabe. Playful identity renders the fan or interactor “capable of attesting to his or her own existence and acting in the world, a self that acted and was acted upon who could recount and take responsibility for its actions” (Ricoeur, 2002) - enforcing the notion that we engage in identity politics also through play, not just by assembling narrative fragments.

The scope of playful identity is not confined to an identity that is not serious or not upholding personal value systems. It implies not just a subscription to rules and objectives set in a domain other than everyday life, but a negotiation between said rules and objectives, and the morals derived from real life. As Frissen et al claim, playful identity does not necessarily conform to the value systems that are prevalent in everyday life. “A playful identity [...] does not necessarily include moral codes of behavior; instead it stipulates the way a person approaches and negotiates with a particular procedure or set of objects and rules” (2015, 114).

The negotiation between real-life morals and morals pertaining to and stemming from one’s playful identity is very relevant to an individual while he is immersed in play. Thus, experiences of everyday life contribute to the formation and definition of playful identity. The impact of everyday life on the creation of fictional narratives is evidenced in relatable fictional characters from various forms of media – such as comics, novels, films, et cetera – who embody human emotion and behavior. In the context of the interplay between real-life texts and kayfabe texts, it is important to highlight the reciprocity between life and play. Play has an integral role in shaping real life; it is an essential component of culture and civilization. Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*, claims that “civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. [...] it arises in and as play, and never leaves it” (Huizinga, 1949, 173).

Now, I will be shifting focus to the experiences that take place in play environments, and their effects on playful identity. Playful identity is not static; it is modified and redefined over time due to added layers of in-play experiences – experiences with objects, personas, narratives, et cetera. This brings me to another integral characteristic of playful identity – it is a reciprocal process based on interaction. The formation and sustenance of identity are governed by the encounters of an individual while interacting with others (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Turner, 2012). Playful identity, existing simultaneous to an individual’s identity in everyday life, is cultivated through encounters that the individual has while being situated in a particular play world such as kayfabe. Kayfabe fosters identity politics by infusing texts from real life which urges players to confront their playful inclinations, while also interacting with other players in

the same play world who may not have identical attitudes towards kayfabe. These encounters are not just with others or the physical space, but also with the identity of self while interacting with these elements. Therefore, playful identity exists in negotiation with the codes of behavior derived from everyday life, and as a consequence of the various experiences that an individual has in the given play environment (Frissen et al, 2015, 117). It is an additive, dynamic process.

Playful Identity performance in WWE fandom

“The nature of play may be unproductive, but it could also produce a variety of goods or personal experiences that factor into the identity of the player” (Toepfer, 2011, 65)

The WWE audience has been defined as a “playful audience” (Toepfer, 2011), referring to the willful suspension of disbelief that players implement in order to participate in the WWE experience. This allows the players to build an emotional connection with the performers, story arcs, and matches. The connection that fans develop with wrestling is more multifaceted than, for example, a television series. The reason for this is that professional wrestling follows a constant, unending storytelling model with no breaks, no stoppage in storytelling. It also offers the possibility of creating doubt in the minds of its viewers. In a television series or film, everything happening on the screen is pre-planned and edited ahead of time, while professional wrestling shows are almost always unfolding in real-time, with the possibility of using wrestling storytelling devices that give the impression - whether legitimate or otherwise - that unplanned events have occurred. The following of a script even in live performance sets professional wrestling apart from sports programming as well.

The inherent persuasion of making the player buy into the narrative distinguishes the characteristics of wrestling fandom. If this emotional connection with the WWE game overcomes the smart player’s tendency to critique the experience, he is deeply immersed in the game despite being aware of the game’s scripted nature. In wrestling terminology, this is called “marking out” (Reinhard et al. 2019) - in relation to the casual fans being called ‘marks’ - referring to the responses that would be associated with the non-critical, playful role of the audience associating more with the emotional aspects of the performance. In most cases, ‘marking out’ happens when the player’s reaction is almost subconsciously in agreement with the script, i.e. the response and action that the script desires from the players (cf. Aarseth, 2014 - Implied Player). This is evident when a legendary performer or a popular injured wrestler makes a return, causing an outpour of cheers and support from the audience. However, that is not always the case. This playful mood is also perceptible in “playfully antagonistic relationships” (Jeffries, 2019, 123) between the players themselves, voicing conflicting opinions on storylines or performers. This can also invite transgressive play, where players resist the reaction that the game and the performers intend to elicit from them. For example, popular WWE superstar Roman Reigns is known for being a polarizing figure in the professional wrestling industry because of his poorly-received run as the primary ‘babyface’ (heroic character/good guy). A majority of Roman Reigns’ fan base consists of marks, those who believe the WWE competition is legitimate, whereas most smart players stand opposed to the way his character is booked, labeling it as a case of the company incessantly ‘pushing’ (promoting) a performer who is not ready to be cast in the intended role of poster boy (Funk, 2018; Terror, 2018). The reception of another babyface, John Cena, similarly divided the audience into two groups, made obvious through the reactions of live crowds, with some chanting “Let’s go Cena!” and others firing back with “Cena sucks!” (Amino, 2016).

In line with the playful aspect of WWE fandom characterized by this unique performative environment, players have the chance to choose whether or not to perform their roles as fans, while balancing the critiquing role simultaneously. Roger Silverstone, in his book *Why Study The Media*, claims that “we are all players now in games, some or many of which the media make. They distract but they also provide a focus. [...] We know [...] when we are playing and when we are not” (1999, 59). This choice to be playful, with respect to WWE fans, is made taking into consideration the smart player’s awareness of the fact that the success of scripted story lines is dependent on their active participation and the sense of fan community, one where the smart player does not explicitly expose the scripted nature of the WWE presentation to other fans – the way to do so being to continue his performance as a member of the playful audience.

Dual Levels of Engagement

As mentioned earlier, there are two discursively established broad categories of WWE players – marks (casual) and smarks (smart player). However, there is a potential for overlap between the two groups (cf. Juul, 2012). The focus remains on how the player chooses to interact with the game, and thus identifies himself by virtue of his choice. The inclination of the mark to play the role of a fan – responding according to the intention of the script – is much stronger than that of a smark. The mark is easier to fool, easier to make buy-in, simply because his propensity to be skeptical is comparatively lower compared to the smark. In his essay “The World of Wrestling”, Roland Barthes comments on the playful inclinations of the WWE audience, which effectively captures the traditional viewpoint of the casual players. “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters not what it thinks but what it sees” (1972, 15). However, as mentioned before, in the modern wrestling fandom, it is implausible to remain completely oblivious to some of the inner workings of professional wrestling, especially due to social media and its role in ‘pulling back the curtain’. Thus, more importance is placed on playful inclination of the mark - whether he chooses to play this role or not.

For a casual player, the suspension of disbelief is automatically to the extent that the authenticity of the performance is not actively questioned, with the responses generated from that premise. On the other hand, a smart fan would factor in the overarching story line that the match is a part of. This also informs him about the purpose of the match, his personal inclination towards the involved wrestlers, the chemistry they share in the wrestling ring, his opinion on who *should* win, and also who *will* win, et cetera. i.e. they are considering the wrestling drama as a ‘game’ in terms of its rules of production rather than just a narrative. These considerations fuel his choice to play or not to play.

Playing, here, means the act of consciously engaging with aesthetic elements of the performance, whilst possessing the skepticism toward the artistic presentation. On the surface, a well-informed spectator is indeed fully aware of his degree of engagement, thereby equipping himself with the choice to do so or not. However, it is not egregious to speculate that, given the partial surrender to staged reality – one that results in near-involuntary responses of thrill, approval, and engagement – there is a real blurring of the line between willful participation, and subconscious participation on the part of the spectator.

This is where the ambiguity of play factors into the experience of the player. In *Playful Identities*, Frissen et al refer to the double experience of aesthetic experiences, likening it to the play experience through the example of watching a horror movie (2015, 18). Watchers of a horror movie are aware of the fact that they are watching a fictional depiction of something considered to be scary, and yet these watchers are persuaded, even drawn to experience emotions that the movie-makers desire. In this example, all watchers are 'smart'. They know it is a movie, but that does not make them curtail their emotional experience. Similarly, smart players of the WWE game are able to perceive WWE programming as a work of fiction, which elicits real reactions from them.

The smart player is situated in both the real world and the play world of kayfabe. This double experience is essential to the experience of playing since playing has to be with the knowledge of the world beyond the scope of play. There is no rule in WWE which says you are either in the play world or the real world; however, to be aware of playing, one must know that there is a world beyond the play world. Kayfabe exists not outside, but parallel to real life, lending credence to the notion that "human play never really occurs outside everyday reality" (ibid, 18). The impression of operating outside reality is the central aspect of play. This simultaneous experience is what foregrounds the potential of play to liberate the player from the morals and rules of real life, affording him a play world where he "hides his real self behind his role and is submerged by it" (Fink, 1968, 23). Eugen Fink, in *The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play*, goes on to claim that "while playing, man retains a knowledge of his double existence, however greatly reduced this knowledge may be. [...] Not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play" (ibid.).

This knowledge on the part of the player of existing in both worlds is of paramount importance for understanding his reactions and perception of the play world. In terms of professional wrestling, for a smart player to 'mark out' – to buy into the game's narrative and react as if it were real – is an indication that he is deeply immersed in the game, i.e. his knowledge of his dual levels of engagement is low. Simply put, the game is too good; the game is good enough for the player to believe the lie. A good horror film, among other criteria, induces horror from the watcher; a good professional wrestling narrative makes the player's appreciation for it subjugate his knowledge that the game is not real. In this scenario, the game is persuading the player to play, and this choice is not necessarily made voluntarily since the player is not averse to playing playfully (reacting non-critically). When the game meets the standard that the player has set for himself, he is likely to play whole-heartedly without explicitly choosing to do so.

Self-Experience

"What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre. In both, what is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private" (Barthes, 1972, 18).

In order to experience what Barthes has termed the 'image of passion' with respect to wrestling, the player needs to be aware that the vantage point is not in the same world as him. While discussing the dual and simultaneous nature of the player's experience while engaging with the aesthetics of the game, we established that, on some level, the player retains the knowledge of his 'double existence', as Fink put it. Evidence of this scenario in the WWE is found every time the term 'marking out' is used, since the player acknowledges that he consciously responded to

the narrative in the manner that the game intended. The retention of this knowledge means that there is a scope for the player to consider both his stances, to play the game both ‘casually’ and ‘smartly’ or ‘critically’ at any given time. In the scenario described in the previous section, the smart player is persuaded by the game to play in spite of his critical gaze. That does not take away his status of being a smart player, but rather is a statement of the achievement of the game itself. For a casual fan, who has abolished “all motives and all consequences” (Barthes, 1972, 15) and bought into the WWE spectacle, the game does not need to be *as* persuasive because the player is majorly reacting to what he is seeing, not necessarily thinking or analyzing the reaction – even subconsciously. And yet, a particularly disappointing wrestling narrative will not be immersive even for casual players, who still have at least a basic understanding of what kinds of narratives appeal to them. The casual player is there for the entertainment; if he is not entertained enough, he will recognize his own dissatisfaction emanating from the experience. A smart fan possesses the ability to imagine receiving a narrative like a mark, while a mark can always be educated about the staged nature of the presentation and made a smark. Thus, I argue that both levels of engagement are not categorically mutually exclusive. The inherent common motivation for both player groups is that “they desire the experience they believe the game can give them” (Juil, 2012, 9). Among the various degrees of overlap that are possible, given the dynamic nature of spectator perception, there is one event – namely, the inevitable point where the two levels of engagement clash – where the viewer is simultaneously conscious of the dual nature of their experience.

The concept of self-experience and that moment of simultaneous consciousness has been explored from the lens of the theater by Chiel Kattenbelt in *Intermediality in Performance and as a Mode of Performativity*.

“An orientation towards one’s own subjectivity, particularly towards oneself as an experiencing subject and subject of experience, creates the possibility of perceiving and experiencing oneself both within the aesthetic framework and in relation to the lifeworld.” (Kattenbelt, 2010, 31-32)

The aesthetic framework for WWE players is kayfabe, which is perceived through their playful identity. Playful identity reflects the “aesthetic orientation” (ibid., 30) that players have to adopt to perceive kayfabe narratives and respond to them accordingly, despite their knowledge that everything is scripted. Kattenbelt alludes to the liberating effects of this aesthetic orientation. “The aesthetic orientation facilitates a liberating confrontation with one’s own experience, which is made perceivable through engagement with the aesthetic object. [...] The aesthetic experience transcends the projections of daily life precisely to afford a confrontation with its constraints” (Kattenbelt, 2010, 32-33).

In the context of professional wrestling, the player’s playful identity affords him the chance to confront the constraints of daily life, and allows him to act knowing his place in the play world, free of the morals and value systems prevalent in everyday life (cf. Frissen et al, 2015). Smart players are equipped to perceive themselves within the play world, experiencing story arcs based in play, i.e. they can orient their experience of interacting with the WWE game toward their own subjectivity. Once the player is aware of being situated simultaneously in both kayfabe and real life, he gains higher agency since he is explicitly aware of his playful identity, and his situatedness in another world, thus allowing him to make more informed decisions regarding his play.

While defining playful identity, I had elaborated on the reciprocal relationship between play and life. When the player is aware of being situated simultaneously in both worlds, his consciousness is guided by the events unfolding in the game, and their intelligible influence on the player's experience. Once the aforementioned event of self-experiencing takes place, the player is not only partaking in the game; he can appreciate his position as an interactor with the game, almost from a third-person perspective (Mueller, 2010; Reddit, 2018). This also brings to the surface the sensing of self within the play world, and also in correspondence with real life. This dimension in a way distances the player from his own experience. The player's perception turns more self-reflexive, which also signals a slight deviation from his spectatorial gaze being majorly focused on just the play world. His playful identity is shaped by both the game, and also the out-of-play narratives that are affecting him. Once aware of this fact, the player is bound even less by the game, and yet continues to contribute to the game with his responses, whether in line with the intention of the game's script or not. The player thus enhances his potential to affect the game itself. This aspect will be explored further in the next chapter.

Player Types

“A theory of games, whether ontological, aesthetic, or socially oriented, must focus on player behavior” (Aarseth, 2014, 130-131).

To effectively position the WWE game with respect to its players, in this final section of the first chapter, I will be discussing the various kinds of players that the WWE game is conducive to, and, in turn, defining the individual categories with respect to professional wrestling and the WWE. I will use these play metaphors to distinguish player types. These do not exist beforehand. These findings will be supported with examples from social media, and popular public forums where players interact with each other, such as YouTube comments, Reddit, Quora, WrestleZone, Instagram, and Twitter. Different kinds of fans, outperforming one another can result in conflict between player groups. I will be using Richard Bartle's concept of player typologies to contextualize and broadly classify the behavior of WWE fans (Bartle, 1996; Bartle, 2005). Bartle's classification has been cited as the “origin” of various other typologies (Tuunanen and Hamari, 2012). This framework, applied to the main metaphor of WWE treated as a game, affords an analysis of **player objectives** and to treat players as more than a generic group.

Players' associations with the game govern their patterns of behavior and participation with regard to the game's production and outcomes. This also foregrounds different **strategies for approaching the game**. I provide examples of fans who can be characterized, according to Bartle, as achievers, killers, explorers, and socializers (ibid., 1) – this classification enables a **rationalization of different fan activities**, speaking to the nuances and differences in fans and their activities with relation to the WWE game.

To begin with this classification, let us take a look at the four major player types as defined by Richard Bartle –

1. Achievers

Bartle defines achievers as players “who are interested in doing things to the game. [...] the point of the game is to master the game, and to make it do what you want it to”

(Bartle, 1996, 7). Achievers are competitive, who are “playing to ‘win’” the game (Bartle, 2005, 1).

2. Explorers

Explorers “delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them” (1996, 4). For them “the real fun only comes from discovery” (1996, 8), interacting with the world of the game.

3. Socializers

Socializers are players who are interested in interacting with other players (1996, 7). For socializers, the game is merely a backdrop, a common setting shared by all the players. Their main drive is to “getting to know people, to understand them, and to form beautiful, lasting relationships” (1996, 5).

4. Killers

Killers are players who enjoy the sense of dominance over other players; they “get their kicks from imposing themselves on others” (1996, 5). Commonly, these players intend to kill the personae of other players, taking pleasure in causing distress, either through bullying or politicking (2005, 2). “They wish only to demonstrate their superiority over fellow humans, preferably in a world which serves to legitimize their actions that could mean imprisonment in real life” (1996, 8).

Bartle, in *Virtual Worlds: Why people play*, has also extended this classification based on implicit and explicit members of each category. Achievers are sub-divided into ‘opportunists’ and ‘planners’; explorers are comprised of ‘hackers’ and ‘scientists’; socializers are split into ‘friends’ and ‘networkers’; killers are either ‘griefers’ or ‘politicians’ – the former terms being implicit versions of the player group, the latter explicit. However, I will not be addressing all of these categories since the typologies framework, while helpful in understanding the core drives of many WWE fans, may not perfectly encapsulate the actions of all players. The main goal of this section is to highlight the various player types in WWE, which I will do by classifying broadly based on Bartle’s four primary typologies, and cite exceptions along with reasons for the same.

In the WWE game or any game for that matter, these player types are not mutually exclusive. The success of the WWE ‘game’ is dependent on the investment of the fans. The WWE has no final narrative; it is an ongoing transmedia event, a meta-game comprised of multiple subgames (cf. Donaldson, S., 2016) - to be explored in subsequent chapters. Motivations for fans to call for changes in the game depend on their former association with the game, their mode of introduction to the game, the cultural context, the treatment of player participation, player interaction, a player’s ‘smartness’, personal biases, et cetera. However, an analysis of player activity gives an indication regarding the player’s apparent objectives. Patterns of player behavior make it possible to group them under one or more of the groups that Bartle specifies. Another example of derived classifications can be found in Roger Caillois’ typology, referenced in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* by Frissen et al (14-15).

In professional wrestling, the players, in part due to their enhanced insider knowledge about the presentation of the show, have realized the ability to effect change in the game’s production

process. The tool of social media has allowed them to communicate with authority figures, producers, performers, officials, executives, former wrestlers, et cetera. Socialization fuels a lot of the roles that players can perform. Socialization and interaction facilitate potential overlap in player roles.

Adopting Bartle's classification, it can be argued that all smart players are **achievers**, due to their insider knowledge about the 'worked' nature of WWE, with regards to their possible belief of having mastered the game. However, I will be focusing on the desire of the achiever to make the game do what he wants it to. The function of all WWE achievers is through communication. Players sharing characteristics with the 'achiever' category are fans who intend to demonstrate a vast knowledge through appreciation or critique of narratives. For example, WWE achievers may call for some change in the narrative, citing grievances and offering alternative creative directions for performers. Achievers want to perfectly understand the game and demonstrate that 'mastery' (cf. Jenkins, 2020), pursuing expert knowledge of the game. This cannot happen without communicating it on social media, or to producers of the game, or discussing with other prominent players. Achievers can also be calling for structural changes in WWE's storytelling, such as calling for particular kinds of matches to fit the tone of a particular narrative. Achievers delight in believing they have a better idea of what makes for good and bad professional wrestling stories based on their knowledge of wrestling history and its industry. A good example of a WWE player who explicitly displays characteristics of an achiever is British wrestling journalist, writer, and internet personality Adam Blampied. His résumé includes work for popular wrestling journalism outlets *WhatCulture Wrestling* and *WrestleTalk*. One of his most popular video series titled 'How WWE Should Have Booked' focuses on popular wrestling narratives that he books differently to tell a better story (Blampied, 2017). Blampied cites other high-profile WWE story lines from the past while offering an apparently improved version of the narrative in question, also using theatrical devices to give the video-watchers an idea of the dramatic qualities of his version. This fantasy booking presents an alternative fictional narrative which, in the mind of the player (Blampied), and probably those who leave a 'like' on the video, is as good or better than what the game produced. This exercise provides a form of critique that the WWE can implement into future scripts, while also informing other players about the possible shortcomings of the narrative being re-booked. For other players who follow such a feedback-oriented series, this also provides an understanding of what Blampied considers to be the ingredients of a good WWE narrative, making them function as explorers, i.e. they are discovering the opinions of an achiever, who is considered to be an important player in the transmedia space of the WWE game. These activities of similar WWE achievers collectively contribute to what Sam Ford has called WWE's transmedia story (Ford, 2016, 178). The aforementioned video series, for example, contains texts from the play world of kayfabe, which are assessed in hindsight by a smart player aware of the game's vast history, from an out-of-play perspective, while adding a rendition of a historical narrative, thus adding yet another text to WWE's transmedia story, unfolding on various media platforms which refer to the WWE directly or indirectly. Other examples of WWE achievers are – players who make predictions or wagers about winners and losers of matches to compete with other players; or players who dissect a match or segment, often offering their suggestions for improvement.

Explorers of the WWE game are those who enjoy discovering the game's world and internal machinations. With regard to professional wrestling, the process of exploration is multi-layered. A player who watches weekly WWE programming, and subscribes to the WWE Network,

gaining access of thousands of hours of archival footage, while also keeping up with the various kayfabe and meta shows that WWE provides, is constantly exploring the game. For ardent fans, the WWE Network provides an ideal platform to explore the history and evolution of the game and its aesthetics, also the various platforms on which the game unfolds – including the network itself. Exploratory roles of players can be enhanced by communication, where they are not just exploring the game world, but also exposing the game’s machinations to other players and whoever else may receive this information. An example of this kind of explorer is Max Landis in his video “Wrestling isn’t Wrestling”, where he highlights the aesthetics of the professional wrestling medium, likening WWE more to *Game of Thrones* than to the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) (Landis, 2015), before going on to provide a career retrospective of wrestler Triple H’s in-ring character. In this case, the player is exposing the machinations of the game to other players. Other players, by participating or consuming such information through videos or forums, are thus exposed to various perspectives on the stories in question, akin to the collection of ‘easter eggs’ in a video game (cf. Jenkins, 2020). Each contribution to such discussions becomes part of WWE’s transmedia story. Players interacting with these texts function as explorers (WrestlingSmarks, 2020). In the same vein, many wrestling fans consume autobiographical and biographical content dedicated to the lives of wrestlers or wrestling personalities. These players also gain additional insider information regarding the game. Other examples of explorers include players who inquire about rules of a match to learn important aspects of the game (WrestleZone, 2009), or players going through predictions videos, not only checking opinions of other players, but also their reasons for their picks. Justified predictions give new players an understanding of the various factors that might play into the planned outcomes of matches (WrestleTalk, 2020).

Socializers in the WWE game are players who discuss topics loosely based on the game, but not to the extent that the game is at the heart of the dialog. This kind of behavior is evident even in the “playfully antagonistic relationships” (Jeffries, 2019, 123) – alluded to earlier in this chapter – that fans in attendance share at live wrestling shows. This is an example of attempted mastery or ‘killing’ through socializing. Live events and fan conventions such as WWE Fan Axxess give players the chance to interact in-person, and their socialization is not limited to the game. The setting is in service to the game, that being the venue of the event, but the main purpose of this kind of interaction is the interaction itself. The same can be said for players who gather on social online platforms. The Internet Wrestling Community (IWC) is the main cause for WWE’s transmedia story to evolve to include texts from real life. This community, comprised of smart players, functions by voicing their opinions on the game on comment threads using platforms such as Reddit, Quora, and others. For instance, there is a discussion thread available on Reddit after every WWE pay-per-view event (Reddit, 2020). Socialization on WWE forums occurs in many forms. The forums can serve an educational purpose for explorers, as already discussed, but are inherently a medium for socialization between players. One of the most common platforms is YouTube comment sections where players upvote comments. These ‘top’ comments represent popular feedback, often featuring references from popular culture, out-of-play memes, and inside jokes between players. This trend is also visible on Reddit, where players post memes that have been tailored to the wrestling audience, making for relatable content that players can engage with, and initiate conversations with one another, establishing group identity through exclusive knowledge. The primary function of these comment threads is the interaction between players, while also enabling certain players to develop into achievers (via upvotes, thumbs up, and other forms of player approval (Reddit, 2020)), explorers, or even killers – thus enabling

overlap in player types. Socializers dominate forums dedicated to the QnA format. Content creators like wrestling podcasters and journalists conduct regular shows which allow other players to ask questions and spark discourse on topics that they are interested in. Features such as 'Live Chat' and 'Super Chat' on YouTube allow creators to host live shows. Players can participate by asking questions, and also answer the questions of other players. Wrestling channels on YouTube such as *Cultaholic*, *WhatCulture Wrestling*, and *WrestleTalk* are examples of outlets that provide players such platforms for interaction.

The **killers** of the WWE game are the players whose activities in the game are focused on undermining and dominating other players, more than anything else. A player who notices common trends in top comments on WWE's YouTube videos, and implements these trends to make his comment the top comment is an example of a killer, whose motivation is derived from the condescension of other players. Another common technique employed by a killer is to disparage other players' opinions or preferences, basing his reasoning on either his belief of possessing a better understanding of the game or a sense of entitlement that prompts malicious remarks. A killer does not necessarily provide clear reasoning for his actions; the main intention is to impose his supposed superiority when it comes to playing the game. Bartle claims that killers are people of few words (1996, 6); however, that accounts for only a kind of killer in the WWE game. Some killers dedicate long messages to critique or deprecate other players' behavior (Sarven, 2019; Flair, 2017). It is true that the remarks of killers, which are by design critical and/or offensive, can also be unsubstantiated. The WWE fanbase, especially online, has several trolls who post comments with the sole intention of provoking fans by bullying. Trolls, in the player typology framework, refuse to play, and instead purposely look to cause distress to other players. However, there are killers and achievers who look to play the game by dominating other players and dominating the game respectively. Though not always the case, smart players can take up the killer role when they insult someone for 'marking out' or for being a mark; the cause for distress for marks here is their lack of insider knowledge about the game which is used to insult them. For example, a smark may ridicule a mark for not acknowledging the texts from real life that may discredit the mark's opinion. In a playful setting, though, that would not count as heinous, making for a scenario in which there can be ambiguity in the role of the player, in this case, between a killer and a socializer. The content of remarks made by killers is not confined to game-related topics; killers may use political, racial, sexual, ethnic, gender-based, and other tones to attack players.

As is evident, there are overlaps in the categories and operation of WWE players, the most obvious one being communication/socialization. The player, in order to fulfill his role, usually has to engage with the game itself or other players. Players can very easily find themselves performing more than one role simultaneously. A top commenter on YouTube, having gotten thousands of upvotes from other players, can be fulfilling all roles in some capacity. The demarcations apply more towards the primary intention of the player, and the evidence to suggest the same. The activities of the players cannot always be rationalized from this lens, but it provides a general direction which allows us to analyze player behavior, and track the development of not just the player, but also the game in response to the player.

The players are the lifeblood of the WWE game. They actualize cultural significance stemming from narratives that are presented to them by the game. Keeping the player – or an appreciable portion of them – happy is necessitude for the game. But even aside from commercial considerations, the WWE game is defined by and through the players. Courtesy social media, the

vocality of the player in the professional wrestling industry is higher than before. This has made way for the various modes of communicating with the game, and affected the meaning-making processes of both the game's script producers and the players. Among other aspects, the next chapter will explore the potential of the player to influence WWE's narratives, along with the consequences of this potential on the traditional magic circle of WWE.

CHAPTER 2: The Wrestling Ring as a Stage for Playful Transmedia Storytelling, Performers as in-Game Characters

In this second chapter, I will focus on the transmedia storytelling model that the WWE has adopted. This model encourages playful participation from the players. The overarching theoretical framework of this chapter is playful transmedia storytelling (Tsene et al, 2014). The concept has been discussed as a tool “to facilitate dialogue/action amongst citizens” (Tassinari et al, 2017) in service of attaining a “fully participative society” (Ibid.). In the context of professional wrestling, playful transmedia storytelling refers to a kind of storytelling that unfolds on multiple social platforms, bringing together the players who informally identify themselves as part of the WWE’s Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). Speaking on the characteristics of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins claims it has “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations with others” (Jenkins, 2006). WWE fans - conceptualized as players - who are part of the IWC are encouraged to express themselves without limitations, contributing in forms of feedback, interactions, alternative fictions (fanfiction in the form of recreating story arcs or reimagining characters, et cetera. Jenkins also delineates a system through which “what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices [...] Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (Ibid.). Players are informally members of this community, which lends them the freedom to ‘play’ as and when they want.

An outcome of this participatory culture is more player knowledge of rules of the game. WWE fans are aware of the scriptedness of the presentation, its possible narrative outcomes, and are also privy to insider information, which allows them to pursue one or many roles (cf. Bartle 2005). For example, players know that the performers who are favored by WWE management will be ‘pushed’ up the card, i.e. afforded more chances to succeed and compete for championships, or that a performer must prove his wrestling ability and speaking ability before he is trusted to hold any WWE championship title (detailed pre-existing route narratives). Access to these underlying rule-systems of playful storytelling is gained through gameplay and interaction with other players - an outcome of the participatory culture alluded to earlier. WWE producers can thus tailor story lines for players who are accustomed to the various rules and are receptive to storytelling devices such as foreshadowing, toying with expectations, swerving and subverting expectations, et cetera.

The scope for playful transmedia storytelling has been enhanced by the revelation for players that professional wrestling is staged. Former WWE producer and booker Jim Cornette alluded to this aspect. “For a hundred years, the logic in wrestling was easy: present it like it’s real, and don’t let anybody know anything else. [...] But now they’ve [...] told everybody that everything’s [staged] except [when the WWE] want[s] you to believe something’s real, even though it’s [staged] too” (Cornette, 2020).

These features of WWE programming will be unpacked in the following sections. This second chapter will initially center around defining the wrestling ring as a playspace and the playful **performative potential of the script** of the WWE. The impact of some fictional narratives can be felt in the real world, beyond the scope of just the play world. The wrestling ring arguably serves as a stage for theatrical events based in play, as a physical space to execute fictional narratives. The first half of this chapter will be dedicated to the work of wrestlers, and how they perform wrestling in the ring. This discussion will largely be based around the physicality unfolding between the wrestlers, while also encapsulating their mannerisms and gestures done to accentuate or capture the conflict between the two characters in the ring. The story surrounding the match makes a wrestling ring a stage - “a designated space for the performance of productions; a space for actors or performers and a focal point for the audience” (Production Management One, 2017; cf. Goffman, 1959; Cole, 2019) - for wrestling characters to air out their differences, either completing their story lines or furthering it as part of an overarching narrative. These narratives have the potential to be performative for the player, in that, the impact of some narratives can be felt by players outside the scope of play, and bring about change or reactions in the real world. This is possible even for narratives that are situated entirely in the play world. The story elements serve as the background for any given match, which also partly determines the kind of match that they will have.

I will be delving into how the performance of wrestling uses a system of **symbolism and historic hermeneutics** which resonate with the audience (Ford, 2016), and result in the production of genuine responses, either aligning with or opposing the intention of the script. Some performers are given a degree of creative control to respond in accordance with the reaction of the live crowd. However, if the players accept the narrative as a whole and do not transgress, this facet is not showcased. From the perspective of wrestling performance inside the wrestling ring, I wish to shed some light on the utilization of **violence as an aesthetic object**, propagating the illusion of violence, appealing to the basic instincts of its spectators. The aim here will be to elucidate how the game uses a **mixture of realism and established practices** in professional wrestling to convey the degree of violence being executed in the wrestling ring, which, through the aforementioned system of symbolism and hermeneutics, communicates to the player what kind of damage and how much damage is being inflicted. For instance, in kayfabe, the ‘big boot’ kick to the head is mostly used as a regular move. A superkick to the head is treated as a more effective signature move; Shawn Michaels’s superkick, called ‘Sweet Chin Music’, is treated as finishing move which typically ends the match in his favor; Randy Orton’s Punt Kick always ends the match, and usually sends the receiver to the hospital, typically used to write the recipient off television. All of these are attacks to the head, but have different implied damage due to the historical meaning of their respective delivery. This aspect highlights Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claims that “all playing is a being-played” (1989, 106). The aesthetics and semiotics of kayfabe capture the attention of the player, building a framework to orient him to receive the WWE game accordingly. In other words, the player is being played by the game to a appreciable degree. The players of the wrestling game are persuaded to invest in the spectacle by virtue of their presuppositions regarding violence in the real world, filtered through the symbolism and hermeneutics developed in the play world. Institutionalized theatrical cues with respect to wrestling moves and narratives frame violence in the WWE. For example, there are certain hand gestures that a wrestler may make to let the viewers know that he is about to perform a particular move in the ring. Many similar examples constitute the WWE’s historically accumulated rules of play. Some of these examples cause **speculation about the scriptedness of**

the content – in that, it is uncertain whether what the audience is watching is part of the script or not (Caillois, 1958, 9). Creating that very ambiguity is a calculated part of the experience. “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman, 1959, 10). The performers in the ring, serving as characters in the game’s narrative, are supposed to play the roles that the script mandates or has historically cast them in. Occurrences inside the ring are largely scripted and/or rehearsed, situated inside the traditional boundaries of WWE’s magic circle, i.e. kayfabe. However, in this chapter, I will analyze the **relationship between the play and non-play world** through examples of story lines where out-of-play occurrences factored into the play world, in an effort to identify the ways in which the two domains converge. The objective will be to validate whether modern professional wrestling narratives exist largely ‘in-between’ the play world and the real world. I apply the concept of the **magic circle** (Huizinga as defined by Castronova, 2005) to professional wrestling’s play world, or ‘storyworld’ (Ford, 2016). The storytelling device of ‘breaking the fourth wall’ has also been used as a storyline trope, where the WWE has promoted the belief that unscripted events have occurred. This trope has been used as an immersive technique to increase audience engagement, activating the scope of transgressive play in professional wrestling through the propagation of speculation in the player’s mind. All these techniques cumulatively speak to the performativity of the script, encapsulating all the various roles it can launch, and in turn, the various responses that can be generated in the players. I will be illustrating this aspect through case studies in the second half of the chapter. The methodology for this second chapter will be **textual analysis** – particularly the analysis of wrestling performances and paratexts like social media and press coverage – focusing on instances where real-life texts affected wrestling story lines and matches.

The Performers

WWE performers, called superstars in the company’s terminology, are given a **fictional persona**, called a ‘gimmick’ (Salmon, 2018, 126; Fandom, 2020), to portray in the ring and in the play world. The gimmick makes the performers in-game characters, giving the performers detailed rules to follow, similar to an in-game character - for example, the moves that he can perform, the attire, manner of speaking, et cetera. There are some similarities to how actors are presented in movies and television shows, in that, wrestling characters play a role on-screen which applies to the relevant play world; they appear on talk shows, charity events, sports games, news broadcasts, et cetera, to (directly or indirectly) promote the WWE and/or an upcoming event. Several proclaimed wrestling characters have been based on actors or their famous movie personae. Chris Jericho’s 2008 villainous gimmick was derived in part from actor Javier Bardem, while legendary wrestler Sting’s ‘Crow’ incarnation was a direct mirroring of “The Crow” from the eponymous movie (Slam Wrestling, 2014; Damage, 2018). However, there are some added thematic elements. The line of distinction between fiction and reality is not as clearly defined. Film actors don’t play as their fictional versions on these platforms, whereas the scope for a WWE performer to do so is much higher, i.e. the notion of a performer immersing himself in a part even outside the traditional boundaries of play with respect to wrestling - akin to an actor’s **method acting** even when off the stage, or on a different stage. A good example of that can be found in footage of Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson delivering his SNL monologue (Saturday Night Live, 2000), where he continues to refer to himself in the third person as ‘The Rock’ – a quirk of the in-game character. He is also interrupted by the then-WWE Champion Triple H, who stays in

character while wishing The Rock good luck before signing off by saying, “But Rock, remember, it doesn’t matter how good you are tonight, Rock, because after the show, I’m going to beat your ass” (Ibid.). Rock keeps elements of his kayfabe persona throughout the monologue, evident in his interactions with other wrestlers Mankind and The Big Show, and delivering his catchphrase “If you smell what The Rock is cookin’” (James, 2017), as the closing to his monologue.

The two identities of WWE performers are thus intertwined while the performer is situated outside the wrestling ring and the wrestling program. It is important to note that these superstars have various aspects to their character, i.e. the players have visual and auditory information that they can associate with any given character. When on WWE programming, WWE superstars follow a script, which dictates both their actions and words in the ring. Some trusted performers are afforded the right to improvise in accordance with the situation and the reaction of live audiences - the game-related notion that special abilities are unlocked by virtue of higher rank - but as a rule of thumb, the performers are merely actors and stuntmen/women in the ring, playing out their roles. These roles, broadly speaking, are divided into two categories – babyface (hero) and heel (villain). Performers operate as good guys and bad guys, portraying traits that are historically interpreted as heroic or villainous, appealing to the moral compass of the players to elicit the reaction that the script requires (Campbell, 1996). The casting process of these characters is based on the talent of the performer, trial-and-error, and patterns established over time that have induced sympathy or acrimony from the players. For example, heroic characters are typically presented to be honorable, adhering to the rules of matches, and relying on their ability in the ring to achieve victory, whereas villains usually display cowardice, opportunism, and treachery to attain their goals. Scripting of any character is thus conducted keeping in mind these templates that govern player response. There are other factors such as star power, social relevance, local recognition, et cetera. A performer who plays a villain can be treated as a hero in their hometown. A heroic character sharing the ring with a much more popular star is unlikely to receive the level of support that the other performer receives. Performers, while immersed in the performance, are thus negotiating with identity politics, especially when patterns of player behavior are considered. The implied player (cf. Aarseth, 2014), in this case, is someone who adheres to an appreciable degree to real-life values that manifest in his playful identity as well, which is the basis on generating any specific kind of reaction from the player, i.e. even while playing his role of a fan, the player is upholding some cultural attitudes derived from real life.

The skills of a performer are the most important determinant of their role. These skills are grouped as in-ring talent – accounting for agility, speed, durability, strength, wrestling acumen, et cetera; and out-of-ring talent – including charisma, oratory skills (‘promo’ skills), managing the crowd reaction, facial expression, et cetera. This broad classification is derived from the fact that professional wrestlers mainly perform narratives through the physical and verbal medium (gestures are accounted for in both categories). The aforementioned skills open up the role-playing possibilities for the performer, i.e. which roles he would be suitable to play, which moves would behoove his gimmick, how much his verbal skills can complement his in-ring talent, et cetera. For example, a heroic figure is more suited to perform high-flying moves in the ring that are designed to generate a sense of awe from the players. A villainous character would rely on unfair means to defeat his opponent and employ tactics such as insulting the local sports team during verbal segments, provoking the ire of the players.

Another important aspect that factors into a performer's role in the WWE is his physique. But I must provide some context. Unlike Mixed Martial Arts and Boxing, professional wrestling does not operate strictly adhering to weight classes because the goal is for the performers to look good and perform as their characters, simulating violence without actually partaking in it. A cruiserweight division (for wrestlers weighing less than 205 lbs or 93 kgs) has been featured, but its significance has historically been diminutive. The world championships of the company – currently the WWE Championship and the Universal Championship – are both heavyweight championships, considered to be the pinnacle of the industry. This also feeds the notion that wrestlers with a smaller frame are less likely to receive the spotlight, although many relatively smaller wrestlers have gained notoriety and player approval due to their skill and promo ability. The common trope of 'David vs. Goliath' has been regularly used to generate player sympathy for the cause of the 'little guy' in major story lines featuring the likes of Rey Mysterio, Chris Benoit, Daniel Bryan, and Eddie Guerrero. One of the case studies later in this chapter is based around this narrative trope. The intention of the game to portray its characters as "larger than life" (Trend Chaser, 2018) is exemplified by the concept of 'billed height', where the height of a performer is exaggerated to give the player an enhanced impression of the performer. For example, the six feet, eight inches tall superstar The Undertaker is billed as six feet, ten inches (Reddit, 2017). Similarly, to make the performers appear bigger, WWE often makes the on-screen interviewers crouch, take their shoes off, or stand split-legged (Upton, 2019).

The nature of competition in a scripted entertainment show is not akin to real sports. Rather, wrestlers have to outdo each other by performing the role mandated by the script to the best of their ability. Villainous characters have to instigate the audience's ire and the heroes have to generate the loudest cheers, similar to Shakespearean theater, in which audiences would also cheer or boo characters they admired or despised respectively (Thomas, 2009). Those who play their role well are rewarded with a 'push' up the card, i.e. they are booked to fight for championship titles and featured prominently on the kayfabe shows; or, they are given exposure on social media or rewarded in monetary terms and other perquisites.

Kinds of Performers

In the previous chapter, we took a look at player typologies, exploring the different kinds of players and their different motivations and roles while engaging with the game. Players play different roles based on their knowledge they have of the game, and the preferences that they have developed during their play.

Similarly, WWE performers play different roles based on the various traits that they possess. These traits are identified by talent scouts, former wrestlers, and WWE executives who recruit talents from all around the world.

"Everybody has different roles within this, right? [...] the entertainment, performance aspect of this. You're playing a role. [...] It is not about an individual performance, but the show overall, and where it all fits together and how" (Levesque, 2020).

The performance of a wrestling match can be analyzed from many perspectives. A match is never not furthering a story involving the wrestlers who are working in the ring. In addition to that, various kinds of wrestlers perform different roles in the wrestling ring during a match. The broad categories are as follows, and not mutually exclusive (Fandom, 2020) –

1. Technicians/Grapplers – wrestlers who are experts in the actual art of wrestling, grappling, submissions; they can ‘carry’ the match forward, covering up potential shortcomings of another performer who may not be as skilled inside the ring.
2. Brawlers/Powerhouses – wrestlers who rely on a hard-hitting style, performing a variety of punches, kicks, and throws, usually highlighting their strength and mass.
3. High-flyers – Wrestlers who perform many aerial maneuvers, leveraging their athletic ability to execute high-risk spots in a match. often inciting the awe and marvel of the audience.

These roles are not inherently character-driven, but can complement a performer’s character. However, it can be said that these roles are assigned based on a general rule-based consideration, i.e. it is associated with gameplay rather than narrative. For example, a short, relatively-smaller sized wrestler such as Rey Mysterio is considered to have more chances to succeed as a high-flying, sympathetic ‘face’ character; whereas a seven-foot tall wrestler such as Kane is a brawler.

To envision a wrestling match that tells the story that captures the direction of the script, and urges the player to feel the appropriate emotion, it is important to factor the attributes, physique, abilities, and styles of the performers. In relation to Paul Levesque’s quote above, all performers, along with their skill-set and style, are pieces to be arranged to structure the professional wrestling presentation, i.e. the show. This sets up different categories of performers based on their placement on the show, or the wrestling card (Fandom, 2020) –

1. Main Eventers – those who normally close shows. They are the main attraction for many fans.
2. Upper-Midcarders – those who are close to becoming a main eventer, but are not quite there yet.
3. Midcarders – those who perform throughout the show, but rarely close a show.
4. Enhancement talent/Jobbers – those who normally lose matches, or job to their opponents to make them look good.

This perspective gives performers concrete goals to pursue, both in play and outside play. In kayfabe, the higher up the card a character gets, the more opportunities he gets to win championship titles, and feature in important matches, events, and narratives that become part of WWE’s history and mythology. In real life, the wrestler earns the respect of his peers, becomes well-known among the players, higher pay, more opportunities to represent the WWE at out-of-play events such as charity events or as part of social movements, et cetera.

The two groupings of performers are linked by the packaging of the performer, i.e. his gimmick. The first grouping is based on the skills and style of the performer; the second maps their position on the wrestling show, the hierarchy of performers. Both these aspects are meta-games which determine the performer’s standing in the game’s pecking order (Donaldson, S., 2016; Boluk and LeMieux, 2018). Each performance inside and outside the ring acts as a subgame. The packaging of the performer determines the ways in which he can showcase his skills; if this packaging attracts the attention of the players, getting them interested in that performer’s story lines, then he climbs further up the wrestling card, i.e. progressing in the game. Failure to do so often involves repeated change in a performer’s gimmick. Bray Wyatt, a.k.a. Windham Rotunda, in the first decade of his WWE career, used plenty of kayfabe names, adopting numerous

gimmicks – Husky Harris, a member of the villainous stable ‘The Nexus’; Bray Wyatt, the occult leader of the Wyatt family, operating with apocalyptic prophecies and supernatural elements; Funhouse Bray, the host of the ‘Firefly Funhouse’ where stuffed animals serve as the embodiments of his previous iterations; ‘The Fiend’ Bray Wyatt, an unsettling, paranormal entity that avenges the character’s previous defeats to other wrestlers – an alter ego to Funhouse Bray. This exemplifies self-referential storytelling in the play world, i.e. the character re-appropriates previous iterations of himself and evolves, often adopting certain aspects of its past. In 2020, Randy Orton embraced an older gimmick - ‘The Legend Killer’ - while also borrowing elements of previous iterations of his character such as internal conflict (from ‘The Viper’ persona) and explosive-violence (from ‘The Apex Predator’ persona). WWE characters are constantly evolving, and often self-referential in nature.

The WWE’s creative team is responsible for a performer’s gimmick, with input from the performer himself. Gimmicks serve as chapters in the story of any given performer, capturing a temporal stretch in his career. Repackaging of a performer can be done when the current gimmick does not allow the performer to demonstrate his skills appropriately, or when the officials of the WWE opine that the gimmick has run its course due to a dip in player interest or to explore a new gimmick idea.

Gimmicks also determine the visual and auditory aspects of the performer’s kayfabe identity. The performer’s wrestling gear, boots, accessories, tattoos, taunts, poses, hair color, logos, initials, custom graphics, et cetera comprise the visual identifiers, while the performer’s theme song, in-ring battle cries, voice modulation during promos, catchphrases, et cetera, set auditory identifiers. When performers meet in the ring, it is a clash of styles, personalities (also including ‘face’ and ‘heel’ dynamics), audio-visual identifiers, signature moves, character mythologies, present motivations, and shared history between them. These elements support the physical mode of storytelling that occurs in the wrestling ring.

Wrestling as Sport and Spectacle

Wrestling is narrative physical storytelling interspaced with various other aesthetic elements such as video packages, added commentary, promotional posters, sound bites, et cetera. These narratives are punctuated by matches, which mark crucial junctures or the conclusion of story lines involving two or more performers. Wrestling narratives are primarily situated in the narrative universe or play world. However, professional wrestling, and WWE in particular, has a very strong presence on social media. Wrestlers themselves perform both their play identity (real-life persona) and non-play identity (kayfabe persona) on social media, essentially contributing to the obliteration of kayfabe, facilitating a mixture of play and non-play elements in social media interaction, and, in turn, in the WWE narrative as well. The notion of spectacle from this section headline allows for situating wrestling alongside other media phenomena and has been discussed in relation to wrestling in previous literature (Barthes, 1972; Mazer, 2020; Glenday, 2013). With an increasing amount of texts from social media being added to WWE’s transmedia story, the game increasingly takes the ‘smartness’ of its players to emphasize on the spectacle of wrestling.

“Pro wrestling is fake, but that’s blood, a steel chair, thumbtacks in the wrestler’s arm flesh, a tooth up his nose” (Wrenn, 2007).

The imagery historically used in the professional wrestling ring is designed to give the impression of legitimate competition taking place. The industry term used to describe this practice is ‘selling’ (Fandom, 2020), the “image of suffering and the ability of the wrestler to withstand superhuman punishment” (Reinhard and Olson. 2019). The portion of the WWE game that unfolds inside the ring is ‘selling’ violence to the players; but it is precise, articulate violence that serves the narrative, and can include props and visuals to enhance this impression, despite the players knowing that the entire presentation is staged. Violence, in the choreographed environment of the WWE, can be said to represent the boundaries of play, in that, the unsuccessful execution of moves which may result in injury is the point where the WWE experience may stop being ‘just a game’.

The structural core of the WWE game is that of a “worked sport wherein athletes simulate competitive combat under the diegetic premise that the action and events are authentic, even though the audience is fully aware of the genre’s scripted (or “worked”) nature” (Toepfer, 2019, 104). Traditionally, the game is structured to preserve the diegetic premise alluded to in the quote above. This is where Epsen Aarseth’s ‘implied player’ becomes relevant, i.e. the operation of the game hints to the kind of player it is targeting. In the aforementioned case where kayfabe is being protected, the ‘implied player’ is the casual fan, who can suspend his disbelief due to the quality of the ‘selling’. A common critique of the smart fans is the deviation of the game from this consideration, that the game “abandons the worked sport foundation at the heart of professional wrestling in favor of spectacle and other less regulated narrative pleasures” (Ibid.). This creates a paradoxical situation in an era of smart players in which the game does not stress on remaining loyal to its traditional structural core of preserving kayfabe, of ‘faking’ reality well. When the game tends to focus more and more on the spectacle that it engenders, its workings fall in line with Max Landis’ claims that WWE “does not pretend to be an athletic competition” (Landis, 2015). If the game outright disregards the pretense, the smart player feels that his intelligence or ‘smartness’ is being insulted. There are instances where players have voiced their concerns about the saturation of primarily entertainment-based content. “The WWE has trouble finding a way to focus on the sport aspect while still remembering the entertainment aspect, often putting too much emphasis on the latter” (Oz, 2012).

Wrestling narratives endeavor to combine and balance aspects of sports and spectacle in order to deepen the immersion of players with regard to the aesthetics of its presentation. In the following sections, I will first be focusing on the performance of wrestling matches and the use of violence as an aesthetic object, followed by how real-life texts affect and constantly inform kayfabe texts, also accounting for the influence of players and how they can catalyze this narrative process.

Storytelling in the Wrestling Ring

“Above the fundamental meaning of his body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious” (Barthes, 1972, 18)

By storytelling from the context of the wrestling ring, I am referring to the construction of wrestling matches that communicate to the players through “gestures, attitudes, and mimicry” (Ibid.), and facial expressions, physicality, et cetera, the story of the match and the narratives of the characters, which further the overarching story line between two or more characters (cf. Redding, 2020; Ford, 2014).

The performance of wrestling is inherently dependent on communication between one performer and another (performer-to-performer), and the back-and-forth between the characters and the players (character-to-player), which cumulatively contribute to deepen the immersion between the player and the game itself (game-player).

“You have a certain mindset of what you want to do. But you have to go out there and follow each other like a god jazz band will do. [...] When you have professionals of this level, everybody works together. We follow each other and listen to what the crowd says and just kind of go with it” (Jericho, 2008)

The game, primarily via the performers, communicates with the player through images, sound, gestures, and words (what Chiel Kattenbelt calls “performative/aesthetic utterances” (2010, 30-32)), but relies equally on a well-defined semiotic convention of communication based in physical storytelling, i.e. the implied meaning of particular maneuvers and gestures that are ingrained into wrestling culture; there is a language governing the action that unfolds inside the ring. Every element of communication has the potential to alter potential interpretations. For example, the use of intonation in speech lends emphasis on certain parts of sentences, which can also be used as a tool for sarcasm or humor. In the case of professional wrestling matches, the mode of communication is primarily physical wrestling moves – portions of this performance are accentuated through taunting, theatricality, et cetera, to generate specific anticipation or behavior from the audience. For instance, each wrestler has a unique finishing maneuver, at the execution of which, there is an expectation that the match is nearing its conclusion due to the billing and suggested impact of the move. This move may also be preceded by some theatric taunting directed toward the opponent, similar to the practice of **foreshadowing** a potential outcome in a game. Randy Orton signals his finishing move by, ‘the R.K.O.’, by descending to his knees and pounding the ring with his arms, while The Undertaker mimics slashing his throat to signal his move ‘The Tombstone Piledriver’, and Edge pulls at his hair crouched in the corner of the ring waiting to deliver ‘The Spear’ – all part of the taunting to the opponent. On face value, the practice seems pointless since it is literally signaling, or rather prophesizing to the opponent, the delivery of a particularly lethal maneuver – a ‘showing of one’s hand’, if you will. But since the performers are putting on a show, the taunting is not for the opponent; it is for the crowd. If the maneuver in question has been positioned as lethal, i.e. no one has been able to win once that maneuver has been delivered to them, then that opens up the possibility to make the player experience disbelief and woe if at some point a performer is indeed able to survive the maneuver - what the industry terms as a ‘false-finish’ or a ‘near-fall’. In this manner, the game can **toy with player expectations**, leveraging their playful engagement.

As for the outcomes of matches - if performer A wins a match against performer B, the former is said to have gone ‘over’ in the match, while the latter is said to have done the ‘job’ (cf. ‘jobber’ above) for the former. If the sub-narrative of a match involves making performer A seem impervious to pain, then he will ‘no-sell’ a lot of the moves that performer B performed, suggesting to the player that the character performed by performer A is stronger.

In the same vein, a professional wrestling match is a performance of rehearsed, choreographed maneuvers, along with aesthetic utterances, performed by the wrestlers involved, aimed at continuing the story arcs between them, and to provide the players with an appreciation of the athleticism and physicality on display. In addition to their respective move-sets, the performers are performing their characters.

“What we do in that ring is performance art. [...] When it comes down to telling a story, you have to slow it down. [...] the cameraman can find your face [...] the color of [your] eyes and the small facial expressions that tell a huge part of the story. [...] (a wrestling match) becomes a choreographed, physical, brutal, violent dance. It can be smooth, and it can look rough [...] (it is about) slowing down and letting people see what you’re feeling” (Orton, 2020).

The performers are engaged in their scripted inclinations as ‘faces’ (good guy) and ‘heels’ (bad guy). To signify the nature and affiliations of particular characters, every detail – from speech pattern, dress code, gait, facial expression to move-set and mannerisms – is accounted for. This also acts as an interface, one in which some conventions of the out-of-play world are made a part of the aesthetic framework of the wrestling performance to enhance the relatability factor for players. A relevant example can be found in the practice of dressing the villainous characters in expensive clothing, which he himself boasts about to antagonize the players and other characters, hinting that the ‘implied player’ (cf. Aarseth, 2014) would typically not have access to those luxuries; the game assumes players to be of lower/middle-class contexts, i.e. envying/resenting the frivolous display of wealth. Values from real life are also present in the play world to provide some relatability to the players, allowing them to form a similar template to interpret narrative tone.

Attached to both these character inclinations (‘face’ and ‘heel’) are aesthetic utterances that constantly inform the players of such. ‘Faces’ adhere to the traditional rules of the match – no hair pulling, no eye-gouging, no low blows, no use of weapons, no leveraging the ring ropes for pinning attempts, et cetera, while ‘heels’ endeavor to work around these rules, by using weapons, low blows, or allies to gain an advantage over the ‘face’ while the referee is distracted. This is also evident in the practice of having a ‘face’ performer demonstrate good values that are already-institutionalized in the out-of-play world – such as being respectful to his opponent, not engaging in attacks unless provoked, not using illegal tactics to win the match; on the other hand, a ‘heel’ is focused on winning the match with little regard for the means, instigating attacks on the ‘face’ before a match to dishonorably increase the chances of victory, also building his character by talking down to the face and the players in promo segments. Thus, even though the playful identity of the players – a concept with similarities to the concept of “aesthetic orientation” (Kattenbelt, 2010, 32) – distances the players from adhering strictly to the values prevalent in the real world, the texts of kayfabe continue to utilize said real-world values to generate real emotions of admiration or censure from the player. For example, the fan will not be calling the police if a ‘heel’ uses a sledgehammer to attack the ‘face’ due to the knowledge that these events were ‘supposed’ to happen in the play world; however, despite this knowledge, when the ‘heel’ insults the live crowd or the local sports team, the players react negatively - another example of performative utterances, i.e. bringing about a real reaction without even having to play a vile character, almost the same reaction that players would have outside the play world. Similarly, several unwritten rules inform the player of what is a part of ‘playing along’ with the game, and what is not. Wrestling characters have the potential to appeal to the player’s conscience, allowing them to identify with some of the moral reasonings presented by the character. This serves as a template to demonstrate the performative potential of kayfabe narratives, where the player is persuaded to align thinking with the cause being represented in the fictional narrative, and potentially act on these in the real world. The game thus leverages out-of-play imagery, semiotics and symbolism to construct points of reference for the players even in the play world.

Aesthetics of WWE Violence and Catharsis

Choreographed Violence and its Allure for Players

“Any account of professional wrestling is incomplete without considering the real violent labour involved in performing staged violence” (Jansen, 2019, 4).

The role of violence in WWE challenges the main metaphor of this thesis since it challenges the boundaries of play. There is a risk of actual injury in professional wrestling. The company’s warning to its younger viewers has been - “Don’t try this at home” (WWE, 2009). This aspect offers real-life repercussions in a playful setting, which occur when the performers make a mistake or injury themselves or their opponents. WWE performers, though not competing in a proper athletic competition, are still part of a storytelling structure that is “composed in performance” (Duffy, 2014, 131). The primary mode of expression inside the wrestling ring is choreographed violence (Smith, 2014; Lachlan et al, 2009).

“Our mediated culture and society have turned into a hyperreality of simulations and simulacra, which means that the signs have become more real than the objects to which they refer (Eco 1985) or, to put it differently, that reality has been replaced by its representations.” (Kattenbelt, 2010, 34)

Representational violence replaces real violence in wrestling, done in service of telling a story. Inside the wrestling ring, the players watch a match which acts as a kayfabe checkpoint in the overarching transmedia narrative being executed in the gamespace. The mode of communication with the player, besides the aesthetic utterances, is representational violence. A player’s “playful identity” (cf. Frissen et al, 2015, 29) frees the player from applying the value systems and judgments derived from real life, which also extends to the player’s attitude towards violence. The simulation of violence speaks to the WWE’s game-like qualities by contributing to the illusion of legitimate competition while making the player believe that it is all real, i.e. to what extent was the player convinced that the violence on display was legitimate, how easy was it for him to ‘buy-in’ to the presentation and assume the role of a ‘mark’; or, whether the ‘fake’ violence was executed well enough for the ‘smark’ to judge the action as good. This perspective also activates player typologies. For example, players can receive a match as ‘achievers’ (cf. Bartle, 2005), watching the matches to check for ‘botches’ (unsuccessful or improper execution of moves), ‘explorers’ (Ibid.), learning the inner workings of a wrestling match, ‘socializers’ (Ibid.), watching a match together with friends and family, or ‘killers’ (Ibid.), condescending other players who may not have similar insight into the match.

Even aestheticized, rehearsed, choreographed violence in WWE, due to real-life social implications and negative associated connotations, has a prohibition and avoidance attached to it. It is not an acceptable mode of communication or interaction in everyday life. Witnessing choreographed violence signifies the player’s confrontation and release from those considerations due to being situated in the play world. The violence alluded to here, is performative in nature. It is not functioning in the same manner as violence in real life. But if the simulation of violence is convincing, then the responses are genuine. Violence functions as a medium facilitating the execution of narrative emotion and responses that the script aims to elicit

from the audience. The viewing pleasure is generated by affording stakes (similar to the practice in video games of incentivizing tasks to gain a higher rank) and meaning behind the performance of moves, and the consequences of the same. In other words, contextualizing a wrestling match through the overarching story.

The structural core of the game propagates that the action inside the wrestling ring is authentic, that the violence being depicted is 'real'. This illusion is 'sold' to the player by the wrestlers in the ring, who are themselves trained professionals who specialize in performing their maneuvers safely without hurting each other while making it look that they do. In executing acts of choreographed violence embedded in kayfabe narratives, the wrestlers perform suffering. To effectively do so, they have to engage in 'selling' the damage done to the player. Roland Barthes expounds on the concept of suffering in professional wrestling.

“The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel offers an excessive portrayal of suffering. [...] Suffering is the very aim of the fight. Suffering without intelligible cause would not be understood. [...] Suffering appears as inflicted without emphasis and conviction, for everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above all understand why he suffers. [...] Wrestling is the only sport that gives such an externalized image of torture. [...] only the image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography” (1972, 19-20).

As mentioned above, the player is not invested so that he can witness the actual suffering of the performer, but rather the image of it. In some cases, to enhance the degree of emotional attachment with the violence on display during a match, the game employs a plethora of depictions, or simulacra of violence – weapons such as steel chairs, kendo sticks, brass knuckles, baseball bats, sledgehammers, et cetera are used, performers jump off 20ft high ladders, elevated structures; less frequently, they put their opponents through flaming tables and dump them on scattered thumbtacks. The bigger the spectacle, the bigger the risk – this element is part of the game, which is communicated through semiotics built over time.

Cathartic Properties of the WWE game

In this subsection, I would like to briefly address what the player gets by willfully accepting the violence involved in the game - in addition to the narrative, the spectacle, and the characters. The cathartic possibilities from witnessing violence are enhanced by the player's conscious choice to engage with a performance that is situated in the play world, perceived by a subject invested in the performance both as a willing participant, and as an experiencer of his own experience while being relatively free from moral judgments in the real world. I will begin this section by citing the **catharsis hypothesis** introduced by Mark Griffiths. The catharsis hypothesis is the idea that by acting out built-up emotions, one can release their aggressive tendencies in a socially-acceptable manner (Griffiths, 1999). Attending wrestling shows and watching it on television is an 'acceptable' way to get entertained. But 'entertainment' is a very broad term; with respect to catharsis, it also implies the vicarious release of energy that the player could not or did not do at an earlier time. The fictional narrative platform allows for the playful participation of the players, who, not despite, but due to their awareness of the scriptedness of the presentation, willfully engage with the game playfully.

The aspect of catharsis is important to outline with respect to play and performativity of the WWE experience since the depiction of violence is the foundation for instigating real emotions in the players. This is a subset of the kind of ‘entertainment’ that the WWE provides to its fans.

In the previous chapter, I outlined the double experience that informs the player’s experience with the game. Another outcome of being aware that he exists simultaneously in both the play world and the real world is that he can leverage his playful identity to derive a sense of catharsis from experiencing the violence being depicted through the game. Constraints of the real-world act as rules that regulate our responses and behavior. Thus, a world where the rules of interaction are different – or are more relaxed – and follow a different semiotic standard, provides the player the opportunity to forego certain consequences, engendering a cathartic release from reality, which also encourages him to perform his playful identity in the play world. This is another function of kayfabe. The game fosters an entertainment-based presentation where the aesthetic orientation of the player is the medium of his catharsis. In *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Chiel Kattenbelt also addresses this aspect from a theatrical context.

“Aesthetic action (in production as well as perception) may be considered a form of exploration and reflection, which reinforces the communicative competence of socialised individuals. This also implies an assumption that aesthetic action has a therapeutic as well as educative function...” (Kattenbelt, 2010, 33)

Actions of performers in the ring have the potential to be therapeutic because real-life values, despite not being as limiting, still inform the player’s experience. The play world of WWE, kayfabe, engenders real cathartic releases from the spectator, which is entirely based on the player’s playful identity originating from reality and undergoing modification caused by the semiotic and hermeneutic practices contained in the performance of wrestling (Schulze, 2013).

To support my claim, I will cite a popular concept of narrative storytelling. The conventional trend of a hero-villain dynamic ends with the hero prevailing at the last episode/match of the story, after which he/she basks in the adulation of the audience’s approval. This moment presents the crowd with the hero’s release of emotional energy and represents the gratification that they feel because the hero’s journey (VRTL Academy, 2020) resonates with them, producing similar reactions in them as well. Essentially, the lasting impression and legacy of these programs hinges on fighting and ultimately vanquishing evil. The motivation behind progressively writing and presenting this narrative archetype is that it is an outlet for emotional energy which the player cannot – with the same consistency – release in the out-of-play world. The therapeutic and educative potential of this practice is markedly heightened by the player’s double experience.

Overlap of Personas from Kayfabe and Real Life

“The convergence between professional wrestling and other areas of media and popular culture is a porous membrane. Texts cross-reference texts from other media and cross-pollinate to produce new, convergent texts and paratexts” (Reinhard and Olson, 2019).

Professional wrestling story lines are increasingly in negotiation with reality. The interaction between the two domains was initially suppressed to preserve kayfabe, but due to the growing number of smart players, the sentiment of “Kayfabe is Dead” has gained notoriety; and now, this aspect has become a facet of WWE’s transmedia storytelling.

“Times changed. Just telling a story and people accepting that storyline for what it is, as a storyline, is gone.” (Levesque, 2015)

The above statement by WWE wrestler and COO Paul Levesque, a.k.a Triple H, speaks to the change in the story-telling model that has been necessitated by the participatory role provided to fans by social media and increased levels of information on the out-of-play lives of professional wrestling personalities. This new participative model lends real creative license to the player, who, if mobilized for a particular cause – for example, through a Twitter hashtag – can cause narrative change in the story lines the company would not have produced otherwise. Thus, the player community specific to the WWE – known as the WWE Universe – wields influence over the kayfabe texts through a collective community voicing its concerns, opinions, and preferences. This aspect is also visible in television productions, where networks are becoming more receptive to fan feedback and aggregate fan opinions, for example, in terms of casting decisions or character arcs (Lips, 2017), which are making television narratives more complex (Mittell, 2006). It is important to note that such occurrences are a testament to increased player engagement, a material indication of audience participation. In playful transmedia professional wrestling storytelling, success is also measured in social media hits, merchandise sales, live attendance numbers, revenue generated at premier events such as *WrestleMania* and *SummerSlam*, buy rates of pay-per-view events, appearances of wrestling personalities at popular talk shows, et cetera – these indicators are altogether dependent on fan investment. In the modern participative form of WWE entertainment, the scope for mobilization is higher due to the out-of-play opinions of players affecting their attitudes while interacting with the WWE narratives and aesthetics. This creates an overlap between the two worlds. In such a scenario, the ambiguity of play and player speculation are important drivers of player immersion, since there are no set rules of interaction for players if/when they believe something unplanned has occurred. Speculation fuels improvised player activity, which urges exploratory player behavior (cf. Bartle, 2005) and ‘drillability’ (Jenkins, 2009), encouraging the player to immerse himself further (cf. Gray and Mittell, 2007).

“Each time that play consists in imitating life, the player, on the one hand, lacks knowledge of how to invent and follow rules that do not exist in reality, and on the other hand, the game is accompanied by the knowledge that the required behavior is pretense, or simple mimicry” (Caillois, 1958, 8).

If we adopt the concept of the magic circle again, the situation being referred to in the above quote represents the idea that the integrity of the play world is being compromised. WWE often uses the tactic of planting doubt in the mind of the player about a breach of kayfabe, called a ‘worked shoot’, described as “an occurrence in wrestling that is scripted to *appear* unscripted” (Jansen, 2019, 3). In such cases, the WWE scripts segments in which performers seemingly act out, conducting actions that the players do not expect to see happening, or think is outlawed by the game. In such a framework, the enforcement of uncertainty is the primary tactic to attract the player. Fans are made to speculate that kayfabe is being broken while the game is situated in the play world. The transgression, in this potential situation, lies not in the action of the player; the game can incept the idea in the mind of the player that the game might be cheating itself.

This aligns with Gadamer’s claim that the subject of the game is the game itself. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that “What holds the player in its spell, draws him in to play, and keeps him there is the game itself” (1989, 106) Uncertainty regarding the ‘fakeness’ of

the product is generated by making the player receptive to the event in which the normative boundaries of the medium are challenged, and the content is not filtered by the script. Uncertainty leads to speculation, which in turn deepens immersion in the game. This bears some similarities to Jenkins' views on "Drillability", a "mode of forensic fandom that encourages viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the comple[x]ity of a st[or]y and its telling. Such programs create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more" (Jenkins, 2009). In the context of wrestling, uncertainty regarding the staged nature of the presentation is generated by making the player receptive to the event in which the normative boundaries of the medium are challenged, and the content is seemingly not filtered by the script. Subsequent 'drilling' (Ibid.) results in players trying to confirm their suspicions by scouring the dirt sheets and social media for hints that serve that purpose.

There are some instances where the game acknowledges the player and his behavior in the play world. This breeds further confusion about which domain the narrative is situated in. In some cases, the game - through a particular character - critiques the player. An example of this can be found in Triple H's promo from an episode on *Raw* from 2014 during his run as the leader of the villainous faction 'The Authority'. After members of his faction failed to win the WWE Championship from John Cena, Triple H expressed his frustration, while mocking the outrage displayed by some WWE fans on social media about the state of the WWE at that time.

"I'm very mad today. [...] But I have options on how I handle this. [...] You know what I'm going to do about it? [...] I'm going to tweet my displeasure. I'm going to jump on social media and I'm going to tweet about it until my fingers bleed. I might even send an Instagram or a vine. That's right. And [...] in however many characters I get, I am going to threaten, [...] if I don't get what I want, I am going to riot. And if that doesn't work, then, by God, me and my friend Mark, we are going to stop watching. That's right. [...] Or I could just fire everybody back there (the WWE locker room); I'll fire all of you (the live crowds). Maybe I just throw you out of the building out in the weather. That'll end all my problems, right? [...] Or, I can relax knowing that sooner or later, I always win" (Triple H, 2015)

The example above shows a 'heel' character not just mention, but also critique how the players perform their feedback, further inciting the ire of the players. This is yet another method of meta storytelling that the WWE engages in. Triple H's acknowledgment of fan critique while seemingly immersed in play - especially when the players seemingly have some degree of influence on the ongoing narrative - is another aspect of the WWE viewing experience that lends a self-reflexive perspective to the players. Acknowledging the players can also urge them to act differently, or take up additional roles in the game. In the introductory chapter, I had outlined the role that ambiguity and speculation occupy in professional wrestling. These are two of the basic drives that are taken into consideration to script engaging narratives for smart players.

Meta-Storytelling and Accommodating 'Spoiler' fans – Edge, Lita, and Matt Hardy

In this section, I will take up a case study to demonstrate the aforementioned aspects. The narrative arc in this case study challenges the player to adjust and improvise his behavior based on his own impressions, and the proceedings of the arc.

This is an instance in which the players were made aware of real-life texts due to the social media activities of one of the performers in this story. The players' knowledge comes from texts that were explicitly not part of kayfabe, which urged them to disrupt ongoing kayfabe narratives, causing WWE to modify kayfabe texts to stop disruptions from the players. The modifications required scripting the play world to fit the narratives that the players were already aware of due to the real-life actions of a performer, thus "spoiling" (Jenkins, 2006) the kayfabe narratives the WWE had in place beforehand.

The narrative arc of this case study originally aired on WWE programming between April and October of 2005. In April 2005, long-tenured wrestler Matt Hardy – slated to make a return from injury – was fired from the WWE. The reason was his activities on social media. Hardy publicly acknowledged an affair between his then-girlfriend Amy Dumas (a.k.a. Lita in kayfabe) and Adam Copeland (a.k.a. Edge), claiming that the former had cheated on him. Hardy also went on to publish several statements about the situation online (Osterlund, 2005). At that time, Edge was better positioned on the WWE's pecking order, primed to break into the main-event scene. The revelation made by Hardy had created what sports journalist Daniel Massey called an "intense atmosphere" in the locker room (Massey, 2017), leading to Hardy's real-life release from the company, which also rallied public support for Hardy's cause after the fact.

With Hardy gone, the WWE approached Dumas and Copeland with the idea of turning the incident into a story line, proposing to turn real-life texts covering the performer's personal, out-of-play lives into a kayfabe backstory for the eventual rivalry between Edge and Matt Hardy on WWE television from July to October 2005. "Because it became such a hot story they (WWE) said, "We want to turn this into a story. But you guys have been professional. He (Hardy) hasn't. There is money involved in the storyline, but it's your call". We felt terrible that he (Hardy) lost his job over this. So, we made our bed and lay in it. Basically, it was like so that he could have a job. I came to work and did that story" (Dumas, 2017).

While Amy Dumas was dating Adam Copeland, her wrestling character Lita was kayfabe-married to wrestler Kane in 2005. Portraying a heroic character (face) at that time, Lita's story line started getting affected by smart players, who were aware of the real-life circumstances surrounding Hardy's release. Fans in attendance began chanting "You Screwed Matt", "Slut" and "We Want Matt" whenever Lita was on-screen (WWE, 2005), essentially forcing the WWE to turn her 'heel'. Player intervention was thus interfering with kayfabe storytelling, to the extent that that creative direction for both Edge and Lita had to be altered. In May 2005, Kane faced Edge in a match. During the match, Lita betrayed Kane in favor of Edge (Adam Copeland), cementing the real-life villainous couple as a kayfabe 'heel' couple as well (WWE, 2005). This is an example of separate subgames - private life and in-ring activity - intersecting, leading to outcomes in one game carrying over to and affecting the other, i.e. activating a metagame.

The betrayal sparked a kayfabe feud between Kane and Edge, with Lita accompanying Edge. However, during the kayfabe wedding of Edge and Lita, Hardy's theme song was played, leading to a loud crowd reaction. But the whole thing was revealed to be a ruse by Edge, garnering heavy boos. This proved to be a set up for July 11, 2005, when Edge faced Kane on *Raw*. Matt Hardy made a surprise return and executed an attack on Edge, while the WWE commentators remained silent, giving the impression that the narrative may not have been scripted. Before being kayfabe arrested, Hardy warned Edge and Lita.

“Adam, you bastard. I am going to make your life miserable. And Lita, you whore. I am going to make your life miserable too. And the WWE can kiss my ass” (Hardy, 2005).

Reviewing the segment of Hardy’s return to *Raw*, wrestling critic Sam Ford had the following observations. “Rather than acknowledge that it happened, the announcers didn’t say a word and went silent; security almost immediately apprehended Hardy; and the show cut quickly to commercial, **leaving fans speculating** as to whether the event was “real” or part of the show” (Ford, 2016). Scripting decisions like these fuel player speculation due to the different aesthetics involved, creating more interpretive layers for the players.

The groundwork was laid for texts from the real-life conflict between Copeland and Hardy to be inculcated into kayfabe texts. Even on WWE’s kayfabe internet show *Byte This* with Lita as the guest, the lines between fiction and reality were blurred. With an online audience watching, Hardy called Lita and confronted her about her affair with Copeland, and the circumstances surrounding Hardy’s release from the WWE. Hardy asked for justification from Dumas for leaving him for Copeland, while warning her about Copeland’s failed real-life marriages. He also conveyed his belief that Copeland should have been fired, not him since he was the victim in the situation. Dumas questioned Hardy for making the issue public, saying, “the two of us needed to sit down and talk, not be ranted on, on the internet” (Dumas and Hardy, 2005). Hardy countered by bringing up the status of WWE performers as “public wrestling celebrities. [...] We were also a working couple. [...] I definitely think that makes this a public issue. [...] Considering the power of the internet, that was going to be out, and I was going to defend myself” (Ibid.). Hardy also cited that during the peak of this career on *SmackDown*, he switched brands to *Raw* to be with Dumas. After explaining his motivations to the players, Hardy claimed that he would seek retribution against Dumas, Copeland, and the WWE. The narratives explored in this segment majorly explore real-life texts, evident in Dumas’ comments on the segment, after the fact, claiming that the WWE wanted Hardy to express his ‘real’ frustrations.

“They (WWE) are like – we just want it to be real. And I was like you don’t because that’s me crying and saying sorry. [...] I just remember sitting there (during the *Byte This* segment) just like my jaw clenched so tight because [...] I wanted to cry, scream, curse and walk out at all times. [...] It just didn’t feel like a character. It felt real. It felt way too real, [...] being acted out and expressed in a completely different way than I actually feel. So it was very hard to come to work” (Dumas, 2017).

The function of players is two-fold in this example. It is the smart fans who learn, who ‘drill’ (cf. Jenkins, 2009) into the posts of Matt Hardy, gaining expert knowledge of the real-life texts, and applying it to their behavior, i.e. of rejecting Lita as a ‘face’ in kayfabe due to her real-life actions, and instead jeering her, which forced the WWE to turn her ‘heel’ and pair her with Edge. The actions of these fans partially resemble what Henry Jenkins has cited as “spoilers” (Jenkins, 2006) - not to be confused with information that spoils/discloses a surprise or yet-to-be-disclosed event. A ‘spoiler’ here refers to the fan who spoils the kayfabe narrative by acting on his insider information, rejecting kayfabe texts, and forcing the game to incorporate real-life texts due to his transgressive play. It is also an activity typically associated with ‘achievers’ (cf. Bartle, 2005).

The strategies to create speculation were also evident on WWE’s weekly kayfabe programming, with Edge, with Lita by his side, acknowledging fan backlash toward his affair, during an interview on *Raw*. “(Hardy) couldn’t separate personal and professional lives and he got fired because of it. [...] You ask me what I feel? The last six months of our (Edge and Lita) have been

thrown out there for everyone to comment on – **a bunch of little geeks behind a keyboard**, who've never even had a relationship, commenting on what we're doing with our lives. [...] I think (the whole situation is bullshit" (Edge, 2005). Prior to a 'Street Match' between himself and Hardy, Edge claimed that the former would be going back to "his websites, whine and complain with his postings" (Edge, 2005).

The narrative continuously hinted at being sourced from real life, leaving the confirmation to be made by the players themselves. In this case study, the players consumed texts from the performer's real lives, projected them onto kayfabe texts, forcing the game to alter kayfabe texts to resemble real life, assigning the characters traits that the players would come to expect from them based on their pre-existing knowledge of the performers' texts from real life. The **speculation** remains about which world the narrative is basing itself in.

The narrative was positioning Edge as a deplorable villain and capitalizing on the outpour of support generated for Matt Hardy after his revelations to the fans on social media. The ambiguity of the story line served to generate interest for the entire rivalry, and later to sustain the levels of popularity that both performers could take into the rest of their careers.

Two more case studies will be included in the Appendix as items I and II. These case studies illustrate other methods of infusing real-life texts into the WWE's transmedia story, offering different avenues for players to act in response to story lines.

Playful Transmedia Storytelling comprising WWE's Dominant Fiction

As evident in all the case studies, texts from the real world are often inculcated into the play world in order to utilize the real-life interest in the angle and get the players invested through meta-storytelling. The surge in the number of meta story lines indicates that the implied player (cf. Aarseth, 2014), i.e. the target audience, the fan for whom the narrative is designed has evolved – audience members are expected (or outright told) to acknowledge the choreographed aspect and scriptedness of wrestling. The 'ideal' player, from a scripting perspective, has changed from the casual fan to the more informed fan who is encouraged to engage with the product on social media and attend the live shows.

This trajectory of the writing process has invited criticism as well. On the topic of breaking kayfabe to enhance the authenticity of a narrative, journalist Blake Oestricher writes – "that completely destroys the suspense of disbelief for the sake of adding a personal element to a feud, and it typically doesn't work anyway [...] WWE doesn't care if its own talent let the world know wrestling is fake, as long as it gets people talking" (Oestricher, 2019). The magic circle in professional wrestling has grown to accommodate and encourage traditionally transgressive play (cf. Aarseth, 2014) from players. This goes to show that the WWE game is narrowing down the scope for actual transgressive play. There is no "right" way to engage with the product. Kayfabe is akin to a curtain drawn to separate the stage area from backstage areas and green rooms, which the WWE pulls away when the story line warrants it.

The active ambiguity in wrestling narratives, fueled by texts from real life as well as kayfabe (Campbell, 1996, 128), is a characteristic feature of WWE's transmedia story. The gamespace

accommodates this facet, marking a shift in the positioning of wrestling narratives. As wrestling scholar Christian Norman writes, “WWE shifted its mode of narrative address to make the fans’ critiques part of the televised storylines” (2017, 92). These players are aware of their double experience, while also being aware of their roles as observers and critics. Wrestling narratives are increasingly situated in this ‘in-between’ domain, where players contribute to the participatory culture by engaging with the game through transmedia platforms, taking on multiple roles in the process. Story lines are no longer rooted explicitly in kayfabe or the real world, but influenced by both to varying degrees at different times. This is where Jacques Rancière’s concept of ‘Dominant Fiction’ becomes relevant. Maggie Macary’s comments on ‘Dominant Fiction’ offer one such avenue. “A dominant fiction is a way that a society theorizes hegemony (dominance). He sees the dominant fiction as a reserve of images and a manipulator of stories, its purpose is to give members of a social structure, a consensus in how they identify themselves” (Macary, 2005).

The players, through the transmedia presence of WWE narratives and the telling of meta stories, identify themselves as contributors to the game, and not just ‘playing along’ with the game. In fact, playing the game has taken on a much larger meaning than simply playing along with the game. Exchanges between the players is the foundation of the dominant fiction in the world of professional wrestling. The dominant fiction might mirror more elements of kayfabe or reality at different stages of the transmedia narrative. With the emergence of social media, the real lives of performers are more accessible to the players, thus making the latter more aware of their own position inside the game. The average WWE fan knows the real names of his/her favorite superstars and has access to their day-to-day updates – including pictures, captions, videos, et cetera. This progressively informs the onset of the self-reflexive attitudes that act as the basis for the double experience of play (cf. Frissen et al, 2015) – as pure observers in case of perceiving the play world of kayfabe, and as critics and participants in the real world, interacting with performers, the game, and other players, while also contributing to the game’s transmedia story.

In professional wrestling, the dominant fiction is rooted in the interdependent ‘in-betweenness’ of art and life. There is a tendency in both toward this dominant fiction, shaping it in the process, in that, art imitates elements of life, and life imitates elements of art, but progressions from both spectrums divert towards this ‘in-betweenness’, constructing an accepted made-world with its unique aesthetics. Branches of kayfabe modify the playful identity of the player to such a degree that when reality is introduced in its raw form inside the play world, there is ambiguity and uncertainty in the player’s mind regarding which spectrum the progression is leading him toward; in other words, he is left wondering whether what he saw was ‘real’ or not.

CHAPTER 3: Framing Wrestling Production as a Game

In a 2019 interview WWE Chief Brand Officer Stephanie McMahon explained the range of products that the WWE offers, inviting different kinds of audiences under its umbrella, and how the company adopts business models from other media companies with similar goals, or aspects that WWE aims to incorporate into its own operations.

“We actually deliver an entire ecosystem, [...] we believe in having three pieces. So, it is linear [...] We license our content to 180 countries in 28 different languages. [...] And then we have our AVOD strategy (Advertisement based Video On Demand) [...] Youtube being a primary platform for us where we [produce] original content” (McMahon, S., 2019). WWE’s ‘ecosystem’ is of central importance to this chapter, with respect to all the other businesses and companies that contribute to WWE’s corporate affiliations. McMahon starts unpacking the WWE’s business activities with the WWE YouTube channel (with over 65 million subscribers), being the most popular video platform of the company’s primary business offerings, i.e. sports entertainment, available to fans free of charge. On the same platform, WWE offers different products, aimed at a more niche market. “And (we) also have started different (business) verticals. A gaming vertical, (YouTube gaming channel) upupdowndown with (WWE performer) Xavier Woods. [...] The Bella Twins have a lifestyle vertical” (Ibid.). Both aforementioned ‘verticals’ have upwards of 2 million subscribers. McMahon proceeds to explain expansions in the WWE’s supplementary ventures. “We have expanded our (WWE film) studios business to go beyond theatrical or just feature film or direct-to-DVD. Now we’re partnering with the different platforms” (Ibid.). The WWE’s recent partnerships include HBO Sports’ Andre The Giant documentary, and a collaboration with A&E to produce a biography series on WWE Hall of Famers. These steps offer a glimpse into the ecology that the WWE situates itself in. A major step in that direction was in 2014, when the company announced the WWE Network, allowing its paying subscribers access to all archived content in addition to meta shows that the company produces, i.e. shows whose content is not based in kayfabe. The WWE Network, as of this writing, has almost 1.7 subscribers. “Our direct-to-consumer platform - the WWE Network [...] to super-serve our most ardent fanbase. That’s where *WrestleMania* is and [...] our pay-per-views are. [...] We really are **looking to create that customized experience**. [...] We’re trying to learn from [Netflix] as well as all other players, as well as learning from our own audience” (McMahon, S., 2019).

In the third chapter, I aim to position the production contexts of the WWE as a game in its separate system, which itself is populated by other games that factor into the WWE’s production process. I will very briefly elaborate on the historical origins of the WWE, tracking its evolution from the unification of several smaller professional wrestling companies, into an integrated media and entertainment company catering to a gamut of wide-ranging consumers. From a games studies perspective, this can be understood as an outcome of the interaction between various subgames which has intensified over time. After that, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework of this chapter: framing WWE’s production process as a game, drawing on Norton Long’s sociological concept of Ecology of Games (1958). After situating WWE as the primary game in its relevant ecology of games for my analysis, I will present recent developments and case studies that justify this hypothesis.

WWE's Evolution into a Multimedia Enterprise

“There were all these (professional wrestling) territories and fiefdoms all over the US and [...] the world, and (Vince)'s vision was really to combine it and make one global entertainment company” (McMahon S., 2019)

World Wrestling Entertainment, owned by Vince McMahon, is the amalgamation of several regional wrestling promotions all across the United States of America in the 1980s. McMahon's father, Vince Sr., along with a partner, had controlling interest in the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) via his own promotion Capitol Wrestling Corporation (CWC). McMahon would later buy out his father, and start merging the various fiefdoms and territories to form the WWF (World Wrestling Federation), later renamed WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment).

“In the old days, there were wrestling fiefdoms all over the country, each with its own little lord in charge. Each little lord respected the rights of his neighboring little lord. No takeovers or raids were allowed. There were maybe 30 of these tiny kingdoms in the U.S. and if I hadn't bought out my dad, there would still be 30 of them, fragmented and struggling. I, of course, had no allegiance to those little lords” (McMahon, 1991). As evident in this statement, Vince McMahon approached this situation as a tactical game in itself - a rather *Game of Throne*-like rhetoric. Political strategy has been conceptualized as a game in academic discourse (Alberg et al, 2011), which is the foundation of McMahon's successful takeover attempt over the wrestling fiefdoms.

More than three decades later, the WWE launched the WWE Network in 2014. Subscribers were given access to archived WWE footage; it also includes some archives from its main competitor in the 1990s, WCW (World Championship Wrestling) – McMahon bought WCW in 1997. The launch of the network has been referenced by Media Studies scholar Shane Toepfer, who views the WWE Network as the culmination of McMahon's business tactics from the 1980s. “WWE attempts to leverage its hegemonic power to influence [...] the ways audiences understand and consume its products. The launch of the WWE Network serves as the culmination of a project that began in the 1980s, when McMahon began to eradicate regional wrestling territories and position his company as the top brand of professional wrestling. [...] On the WWE Network, wrestling fans can access the digitized tape archives of a variety of promotions that span the industry's diverse history – but all of it is filtered through the lens of WWE. [...] Only the shows that WWE deems significant enough to its own corporate history [...] are presented in full, thereby creating a hierarchy of importance in wrestling history that is determined by, and to the benefit of, WWE” (Toepfer, 2019). Here, Toepfer analyzes the underlying goals that inform and determine WWE's corporate expansion tactics, i.e. selectively presenting its version of historical events which position it at the top of the hierarchical chain pertaining to the professional wrestling industry.

WWE exercises its hegemonic power through different channels, The company is the worldwide leader in sports entertainment, and also the largest professional wrestling company in the world. In this third chapter, the emphasis will be more on the production process of WWE. By production, I am not solely referring to the production of kayfabe narratives, but also the decisions made by the WWE to sustain its operations as a publicly-traded company, which is accountable to its investors, local government, target audience, among other stakeholders.

For instance, the WWE employs and/or relies on the services of performers, local venue organizers, medical personnel, television producers, local staff, airline companies, et cetera, for

the successful staging of a WWE show. Due to social media, the analysis of wrestling now integrates the input of smart players, media critics, former wrestlers, officials, and others. This chapter pursues a media production studies perspective on wrestling (Banks et al, 2016; Paterson et al, 2015), with emphasis on analyzing interviews, podcasts, and comments made by journalists and notable officials of the company on matters concerning the production of narratives and their consequences.

Applying the Ecology of Games metaphor to Wrestling Production

This chapter will include research into WWE story lines, both kayfabe texts and real-life texts, from the perspective of the WWE's production contexts. In this chapter, the perspective will shift more from the players and characters to the game(s), i.e. games that are situated in a system designed to produce "systematically functional results for the ecology" (Long, 1958, 251). WWE will serve as the primary game, one in a network of multiple other games that contribute to the production process in a variety of ways. These other games refer to spheres and industry sectors such as politics, licensing, distribution, travel, legality, et cetera - each game pursuing its own goals, and leveraging other games in the system for their respective production processes. The theoretical framework of this chapter will derive from Norton Long's concept of an Ecology of Games (Long, 1958) who proposes that a local community can be conceptualized as an ecology of games, which function as their own respective entities within a particular system, as "structured group activities that coexist in a particular territorial system can be looked at as games" (252). In case of professional wrestling production, the independent games constantly negotiate their interrelations with each other; however, the ecology of games in wrestling production does not have to be territorial, or defined geographically, since a significant amount of production takes place on digital platforms. Thus, these games interact and are part of the ecology even though they are not in the same physical location. I use this metaphor to re-frame the political ecology of the production process of the WWE.

Production of wrestling narratives is not a self-contained process. Especially given WWE's diverse business ventures, the production process is acted upon by a large ecology of related games – politics, relevant media business ventures, gender roles, finance, popular culture, et cetera. The interaction between these games takes place without any established hierarchical organization or polity, similar to the interrelated games like manufacturing, education, and public relations in a "local community" (Ibid., 251) that Long derived his concept from. The WWE reorients their policies based on the expectations of the consumers of WWE products, and the consumers/executives of the many other games that influence the creative process of the company. For instance, story lines are constructed in line with the gender expectations and media acceptance of the United States of America in mind. For example, If the WWE produces story lines that fail to live up to standards of gender equality prevalent in the USA, it affects the public image of not just the WWE, but also its broadcast networks (FOX and USA Network), its sponsors, its investors, performers, individual executives, et cetera. For the WWE, in turn, upsetting its stakeholders adversely hampers its business endeavors. Therefore, WWE constantly operates within the boundaries of the rules at play from these interrelated games that exercise some degree of control on its creative process. These negotiations can result in the formation of social movements and actualization of ideologies through narrative, for example, the WWE's Women's Evolution, will be part of one of the sections later on in this chapter.

One of the characteristic features of the ecology of games metaphor is that the players in one game make use of the players in another and are, in turn, made use of by them” (253). Long gives the example of a banker using politicians, contractors, labor leaders, et cetera for his success in the banking game while being used by members of those same groups for their own success in their respective games. This aspect of give-and-take is visible in WWE’s relationships with HBO and A&E mentioned in the opening quote of this chapter, and also in its deals with broadcast networks, who expect WWE’s weekly offerings *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT* to draw good television ratings to justify paying the WWE the agreed amount of money. Treating WWE as the primary game in its ecology, WWE deals with television networks, sponsors, investors, target audiences, location managers, travel organizers, government agencies, sports regulation bodies, political scenarios, public groups, fan conventions, external production staff, medical personnel, performers, on-screen personalities, et cetera. This also highlights power relations that govern risk-reward and negotiation policies that factor into the production processes.

An important change in terminology for the third chapter is that I will not be referring to the audience as players, for simplicity. In the first chapter, I define the audience as players of their own ‘game’ of fandom with respect to the WWE; here, players include decision-makers in the various other games (politics, industries, social media, et cetera). These games are integrated by the “social game” (Long, 1958, 261), which I will be unpacking later on. For this chapter, the term ‘players’ will be associated with individuals and groups involved in the production process of games. The WWE will serve as the vantage point to analyze the ecology in which it is situated, and I will refer to it as the primary game. The games in the ecology “provide the players with a set of goals that give them a sense of success or failure. They provide them determinate roles and calculable strategies and tactics” (Ibid., 252). In “The Local Community as an Ecology of Games.”

The application of Ecology of Games has been more sociological, rationalizing the behavior of people and institutions. In my case of WWE and the professional wrestling industry, I am taking this concept and adding a cultural studies perspective through a framework where game qualities are much more dramatic than usual. WWE actively engages in the telling of the story of its business as well, as evident in the opening reference of this chapter. With transmedia storytelling on the rise, the wrestling industry, and WWE in particular, dramatizes its production. This is showcased through many perspectives. WWE often relies on its own history to lend significance to ongoing and upcoming narratives. Dramatization of wrestling production can be evidenced in events or performers that are bestowed with the prefix of ‘first-ever’. For example, the current WWE Champion Drew McIntyre is the first-ever British WWE Champion, which was initially turned into an attribute of his wrestling character. This piques the interest of British fans, drawing on patriotic attachments while serving as a fun fact for wrestling historians and dedicated fans. The first-ever Women’s Royal Rumble in 2018 was marketed as such to establish its historical significance and also to legitimize the ongoing ‘Women’s Evolution’ in the WWE - both aspects contributing to fan interest in such a production. Yet another perspective to see dramatization of wrestling narratives is in the meta family business story line, i.e. the WWE is a business historically owned and operated by the McMahon family. This aspect has been part of both real-life and kayfabe narratives produced by the WWE.

My application of the Ecology of Games metaphor explores how the production of wrestling itself can be presented as an ecology of games, produced in constant negotiation with numerous

other games that are in play, determining the physical performance, dramatization, implemented symbolism, and social contexts.

Now I will shift the focus to the individuals involved in the production process. Long outlines a structure in which individual players or members can perform specific activities in their own game that contribute to their goals, and also to the system. “Particular structures working for their own ends within the whole may provide their members with goals, strategies, and roles that support rational action. The results of the interaction of the rational strivings after particular ends are in part collectively functional if unplanned” (251).

The main metaphor also affords us with a template to rationalize the decision-making processes in wrestling production by acknowledging that people and groups are often players in multiple games simultaneously. I will be taking into consideration the practicalities involved, with regards to political ideologies, public relations, social movements, gender politics, labor laws, personal lives of professional wrestlers, et cetera, which all hold stake in the production process, and represent interrelated ‘playing fields’.

Before going into the case studies, it is important to highlight the kinds of games that WWE executives have to interact with in order to produce content for its audience. Being a transmedia entity, the WWE game intersects with television programming, social media, live events all around the world, formal ceremonies, online websites, gaming and lifestyle genres, traditional media forms such as magazines and comic books, and many other platforms – forming a network of these entities that determine its narrative production process. In the ecology of games metaphor, each of these stakeholders is treated as a game in itself, with players of each game contributing to the narrative production of the WWE. For instance, the WWE has to consider fan feedback, societal expectation, actions of rival wrestling organizations, policies of broadcast companies, legal councils, and mandates of the local and national governments, among others good. These would account for the risk and negotiation aspects involved in the production process, and how it is influenced by the rules and regulations of the games in the network. The following case studies demonstrate various combinations of the aforementioned games and more that the WWE interacts with.

Exposing kayfabe and Getting the ‘F’ out

The first case study will illustrate two events brought about by legal considerations which ultimately catalyze the WWE’s trajectory towards becoming an entertainment company. The first event demonstrates decisions made by the primary game to leverage its performance-based presentation, which, in particular, makes it a game separate from legitimate sports. The second event focuses on the WWE’s rebranding due to legal considerations, which is used to represent the growing emphasis on entertainment.

In the late 1980s, the then-WWF was under the jurisdiction of the Athletic Commission of every state of America, which was licensing wrestlers, referees, and timekeepers, while levying taxes on wrestling events held around the country. Vince McMahon sought to avoid this charge by highlighting the scriptedness of professional wrestling.

“February 10, 1989, was the day the facade died, as in front of the State of New Jersey Senate on a bill to remove Wrestling from the regulations that had been applied by the Athletic Commissions, Vince McMahon, representing the World Wrestling Federation, stated that

professional wrestling should be defined as "an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest" (Brown, 2014).

As indicated in the quote above, strategies in wrestling production can have repercussions on the cultural perception of wrestling ('façade died') as well as, at times, even on wrestling storylines due to the intertwining of wrestling diegesis (Litherland, 2014). The public acknowledgment in the quote deregulated professional wrestling, eliminating licensing requirements from professional wrestling. For the primary game, this offered an opportunity to begin the thematic change to market itself as an entertainment company no longer subject to fees and taxes. This also marks the beginning of the 'sports entertainment' era in the professional wrestling industry. In this event, the primary game interacts with the legal domain relevant to its operation, while also making a thematic change which affects the operation of other similar games in the ecology, i.e. the acknowledgment of kayfabe led to the rise more independent wrestling promotions due to the alleviation of several charges and legal requirements, ultimately opening more opportunities for the advancement of the wrestling business.

The focus on the entertainment aspect of the primary game is the point of focus in the second event discussed in this section, that being the former WWF (World Wrestling Federation) changing its legal name to WWE. The following is a press release from the WWE regarding the circumstances around its rebranding.

"To further capture a greater share of the global marketplace and to represent the growing diversity of its entertainment properties, World Wrestling Federation Entertainment today announced it is changing its name to World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (WWE). The company's website, one of the most popular in the world, will now be found at WWE.com. The company began considering dropping the word "Federation" from its name when World Wildlife Fund (a/k/a World Wide Fund for Nature) prevailed in a recent court action in the United Kingdom. The court ruling prevents the World Wrestling Federation from the use of the logo it adopted in 1998 and the letters WWF in specified circumstances. The "Fund" has indicated that although the two organizations are very different, there is the likelihood of confusion in the market place because both organizations use the letters WWF. The Fund has indicated that it does not want to have any association with the World Wrestling Federation. "Therefore," said, Mrs. (Linda) McMahon, "we will utilize this opportunity to position ourselves emphasizing the entertainment aspect of our company, and, at the same time, allay the concerns of the Fund" (WWE, 2002).

The primary game is thus subjected to the ruling of another legal entity, or a player of the 'legal game' in the ecology; a compromise in another game is turned into an asset in the brand management game. The necessitated change also offered the WWE to use the re-branding to further its strategies to evolve into a global sports entertainment company. The lawsuit from the World Wildlife Fund for Nature disrupted the ecology, which prompted the strategic change from the primary game. In the ecology of games metaphor, this was an "unintended contribution [...] to the forming of a new or the restoration of the old ecological balance" (Long, 1958, 257).

The Montreal Screwjob

“Bret didn’t want to lose the championship. It’s your last night in the company. You know what? We will just take it from him” (Prichard, 2020).

In the second case study, we look at an instance that was the outcome of the primary game (WWE, then-known as the WWF – World Wrestling Federation) having to make decisions based on the actions of one of its performers and the rival wrestling promotion World Championship Wrestling (WCW). This event is an example of a screwjob, which, in wrestling parlance, describes a secret change to a match’s pre-determined finish. Such an incident marks a unique sub-category of the various cases of real-life texts informing kayfabe texts, one where one of the performers of this pre-determined presentation is misinformed about scripted events – a unique clash between diegesis and production narrative. The circumstances leading to this incident drew from the ecology of games that WWE is a part of – in particular, its competitors, and the performer’s real-life actions.

In 1997, WCW was beating the WWF in television ratings and became the biggest wrestling promotion in the United States (ProWrestling Fandom, 2020). In response to the success of his biggest competitor, Vince McMahon, the Chairman of the WWF was minimizing long-term financial commitments as part of his plan to make the WWF a publicly-traded company in the near future. A consequence of this decision was that the company did not have enough funds to meet payments to long-term WWF wrestler and then-WWF Champion Bret Hart, who had signed an unprecedented 20-year deal with the company in 1996, a year prior. This cost-cutting strategy caused McMahon to delay payments to Hart, even encouraging the latter to sign with the rival WCW, however, after dropping the WWF Championship. In the documentary *Dark Side of the Ring*, Bret Hart claims, “Vince told me that basically, he could not afford to pay me the contract that he’d given me” (Hart, Ibid.). From McMahon’s side, the reason for this was financial, while McMahon claimed that, moreover, Hart was not creatively satisfied with his position in the WWF. “For financial reasons on my part, and creative reasons on Bret Hart’s part [...] the two of us orchestrated Hart receiving a three-year deal (from WCW) in which he is paid three million dollars a year – [...] the richest deal in all of professional wrestling” (McMahon, 1997). Thus, McMahon protected assets to fund his budding war with WCW and let go of the biggest star in his company at that time, which allowed WCW to ‘steal Bret Hart’; McMahon saw this as a short-term sacrifice for a long-term goal.

“(Bret) was leaving the company and going to our competitor who was beating us in the ratings. To have our champion leave the company is bad enough. [...] When you’re leaving a territory or promotion, you lose on the way out” (Prichard and Cornette, Ibid.)

The expectation was for Hart to lose the WWF Championship on the last event on his expiring contract, *Survivor Series 1997*, to be held in his home country of Canada. In the fall of 1997, Bret Hart was in the middle of a heated kayfabe and real-life rivalry with Shawn Michaels (Kayfabe, 2020). Due to his veteran status and reliability, Hart was contractually afforded “reasonable creative control” (Cornette, Ibid.) over his character, which allowed him to refuse to lose the belt to Michaels in Canada, citing Michaels’ ‘disrespect’ toward him. The original planned finish of the match was a ‘no contest’ – the match ends with no decisive winner. The performer’s personal opinion about his opponent prompted him to leverage a creative privilege afforded to him, leading to a conflict between players in the same game.

McMahon's strategy towards this situation was critiqued by WWE legend Mark "The Undertaker" Calaway, who claimed – "You should have put me in a match somehow with Bret. I'm sure Bret would have dropped it to me. I could have dropped it to Shawn later on" (Calaway, 2020). This serves as an example of how WWE production decisions are inherently conflated with the collectively authored narrative (cf. Parkin, 2009).

The various out-of-play texts contributed to the screwjob finish at *Survivor Series 1997*, which saw the champion Bret Hart being put in a submission hold by Michaels. To lose the championship, Hart would have had to tap out. But as soon as the hold was applied, Vince McMahon, who was present at ringside, called for the bell. Michaels was the new WWF Champion, without Hart ever having tapped out. Distraught at the scene, Hart spat on Vince McMahon, proceeding to write and mouth the letters W.C.W. while looking at the camera.

In the fallout to the incident, McMahon went to record saying that performers leaving the WWF should "show the right amount of respect to the WWF superstars who helped make you [...] to the organization that helped you become who you are today. It's a time-honored tradition and Bret didn't want to honor that tradition. [...] I have no sympathy for Bret whatsoever. [...] for someone is supposed to be a wrestling traditionalist not doing the right thing for the business that made him [...] for the fans and the performers and the organization that helped make him what he is today. Bret screwed Bret" (McMahon, 1997)." This justification, coupled with his new 'heel' gimmick of 'Mr. McMahon, on-screen owner and boss of the WWF', paved the way for the next era of WWE history – The Attitude Era, which saw the WWE defeat WCW and eventually run them out of business.

In this case study, the games factoring into the WWF's 'Montreal Screwjob' are the traditions of the wrestling industry (rules of the game), the real-life rivalry between Hart and Michaels, and Hart's desire not to lose in Canada ('the game of curating one's character narrative'), the money that the WWF could not afford to pay Hart ('financial game'), and the rival wrestling promotion WCW (zero-sum game of competition between wrestling organizations at the time). The screwjob finish is a result of interaction of the games, giving structures, goals, roles, strategies, tactics, and publics to the players" (1958, 251).

The theme of gaining a competitive edge over rival wrestling promotions is a continuing theme in the next case study.

Dominating Online Discourse

As mentioned in the previous section, the professional wrestling business is populated with many promotions. The WWE has to compete with other wrestling companies operating in the ecology while devising strategies to pursue one of its primary goals – to maintain its status as the biggest wrestling promotion in the world. With the rise of the internet and then social media, most promotions have a strong presence on the internet, with their own websites and social media accounts. With the online platform proving another competitive space, all similar games implement strategies to gain dominion.

These practices bear similarities to "system gaming", where "entrepreneurs devote time and energy to understanding how algorithms structure their online shops and digital content creators are [...] attuned to the impact of rating and recommendation systems in ordering their social media feeds" (Petre et al, 2019, 1). Online communication, especially competing for attention

online and optimizing keywords is inherently understood and discussed as a game-like situation. This space has not been subjected to explicit regulation, allowing for the games to use the system to pursue their goals creatively, giving credence to the findings of Petre et al, which advocate that “the line between what platforms deem illegitimate algorithmic manipulation and legitimate strategy is nebulous and largely reflective of their material interests” (ibid.). In the professional wrestling industry, especially with the empty-arena wrestling shows being aired on television in 2020, the digital space is virtually the solitary mode of interaction with the audiences. More than ever before, even for wrestling content, “algorithms establish the conditions through which visibility is constructed online” (Bucher, 2012, 82). Thus, game strategies are defined by trying to understand and cater to these algorithms.

The primary game endeavors to dominate the online platform through enhanced visibility and provide easy access for its audiences. To pursue this goal, the WWE has often used superlatives in its marketing titles. For instance, one of WWE’s shows in Saudi Arabia was advertised as *The Greatest Royal Rumble* in April 2018. Another example of this strategy is “The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever” contested in June 2020 between Edge and Randy Orton. The promotional tag was questioned by multiple wrestling journalism outlets (Kip Clips, 2020; F4WOnline, 2020; WrestleTalk, 2020), while the WWE was releasing predictions featuring wrestling legends and current performers offering their thoughts on who would prevail in ‘The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever’ (WWE, 2020). Fans, critics, and wrestling new outlets flooded the internet with opinions on the match’s divisive billing, contributing to online traffic, and heavy horizontal and vertical internal linking with regards to the upcoming “Greatest Wrestling Match Ever” - thus the primary game created controversy as part of its strategy. In addition to building interest for the match itself, the significant amount of hype, comments, critiques, and sharing grew the WWE’s presence in discussions regarding the greatest wrestling match ever (Reddit, 2020) and aided Search Engine Optimization (Colohue, 2020; Tap Out Corner, 2020). “It has nothing to do with putting on a great match. It is about cornering the market and making sure the WWE stay at the top of the game and of any competitors” (Colohue, 2020). It can also be argued that the ‘outside interference’ to the ecology from occurrences such as the current Covid-19 pandemic alters the rules of the game, which, for example, might prompt audiences to yearn for an ‘epic’ event such as ‘The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever’ to pique interest and maintain their willingness to keep engaging with the game.

A keyword search of the ‘greatest wrestling match ever’ would fetch multiple results of Edge vs. Randy Orton at *Backlash*, and the rave reviews and controversy surrounding it, before similar coverage of any other match is shown; this strategy of the primary game reduced search results of great matches stemming from other wrestling promotions, allowing the primary game to monopolize the relevant online space. WWE’s domain authority is thus expanded, a measure of the relevance of a website for a specific subject area or industry – in this case, for the greatest wrestling match ever in professional wrestling. In a time where ticket sales are non-existent due to no live crowds, WWE battled for greater online presence and, in turn, profit-margins from offerings on digital platforms. This is another example of the WWE, the primary game, competing with other games in the network to retain or improve its standing in the professional wrestling industry within the system it resides in.

Cross-over Appeal

“Professional wrestling and other realms of pop culture will likely continue to blur and converge. Such blurrings demonstrate that while professional wrestling takes from various aspects of popular culture, it gives back as well” (Reinhard and Olson, 2019).

The quote above demonstrates another case of players of one game using and made use of by players of another game (Long, 1958, 251). Professional wrestling and popular culture go hand-in-hand. While discussing Vince McMahon’s vision for the WWE’s first-ever *WrestleMania* in 1985, daughter Stephanie McMahon explains, “My dad was trying to make it bigger than sports. [...] What was going to put us on the map? There was no such thing as social media back then. So, the idea was the combine the best of pop-culture and what we call ‘sports entertainment’” (McMahon, 2019). To contextualize, *WrestleMania I* boasted a who’s who of pop-culture icons. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali served as guest referee for the main event match which also featured actor and *Rocky III* star Mr. T; American singer Cindy Lauper was the manager who accompanied Wendi Richter to the ring; Baseball player Billy Martin (ring announcer) also made an appearance, while musician-actor Liberace (also serving as timekeeper) and American band The Rockettes opened the show. The American celebrity system (cf. Kuzerman et al, 2007) operates as a separate game that intersects here with wrestling production.

In this section, I will be highlighting instances of celebrities appearing in the primary game to boost its commercial standing. These events underscore the WWE’s attempts to enhance its cross-over appeal – the WWE collaborating with actors, politicians, popular sports personalities, public figures, athletes from combat sports, et cetera. *WrestleMania*, ‘The Showcase of the Immortals’, the WWE’s equivalent of the SuperBowl, is an annual cross-culture event, with its various linked events spanning a weekend, or, in some cases, an entire week; this period is considered the busiest and most profitable part of the WWE calendar, called ‘WrestleMania season’. The convergence of professional wrestling and popular culture is well-documented. There is a Wikipedia page solely dedicated to the celebrity appearances on WWE’s annual extravaganza *WrestleMania* (Wikipedia, 2020) – this can also be considered a kind of archontic fan activity to “preserv[e] cultural memory on the internet” (Bradshaw, 2017). This list includes pop culture icons such as Mr. T, Floyd Mayweather, Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson, Pamela Anderson, Motorhead, Aretha Franklin, Kim Kardashian, Rhonda Rousey – the list is virtually endless (WWE, 2020).

Such convergence, involving cross-reference between texts from different media, is mutually-advantageous for players of all games converging. In the lead-up to *WrestleMania 23*, Donald Trump became part of a kayfabe rivalry against Vince McMahon, and both chose a WWE performer to represent them in what was dubbed ‘The Battle of the Billionaires’, with the added stipulation that the winning billionaire would shave the loser’s head bald. Trump’s wrestler won the match, leading to a “*WrestleMania* moment’ of Trump shaving McMahon’s head on pay-per-view, thus proving the stakes involved in the production. The video of the event does not allow viewers to comment - another tactical consideration to limit viewer feedback and maintain relationships with other players. The moment itself received main media coverage (Fish, 2018), and contributed to one of the highest-grossing *WrestleMania* editions in history.

The primary game, in some instances, makes use of not just cross-over star power, but also the skills of the celebrity. These instances are more common when the celebrity has a background in

some combat sport or boasts the attributes necessary to participate physically in the wrestling narrative. *WrestleMania 14* featured legendary boxer Mike Tyson in the role of enforcer for the main event between ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin and WWF Champion Shawn Michaels. Tyson was introduced as ‘The Baddest Man on the Planet’ even in kayfabe, capitalizing on the controversy surrounding his revocation from boxing during that time. Tyson engaged in a scuffle with ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin in the weeks preceding *WrestleMania*; however, in the match, Tyson betrayed Michaels and counted the decisive pin-fall to crown Austin the new WWF Champion. After the match, he knocked Michaels out with a straight right. Tyson’s involvement has been credited as having ‘saved WWE’ in its ratings war with rival promotion WCW (Sport Bible, 2019).

“Tyson's feud with Austin brought a fresh audience to a brash, charismatic wrestler more than a decade younger than WCW's stars such as Hogan and Macho Man Randy Savage. It told at the box office as *WrestleMania 14* in March 1998 sold out (unlike the previous year's *Mania*), drawing over \$1m in ticket sales in Boston. [...] It grossed over \$11m [...] making it the biggest show the WWE had ever put on. More importantly, it had strapped a rocket to Austin's popularity and launched a lucrative new era” (Ibid.).

Tyson was paid a whopping \$3.5m by WWE, and featured on the poster of *WrestleMania*, making the most of his name value in real life, while also timing this production decision in the aftermath of Tyson being stripped of his boxing license for biting Evander Holyfield’s ear. Tyson needed the money (Ibid.), and McMahon wanted the edge in the ratings war; players of both games were able to pursue their respective goals with an overlap in strategies.

Broadcast Networks

One of the prime stakeholders for the WWE are its broadcast network partners – current the USA Network for *Raw* and *NXT*, and FOX for *SmackDown*. The mandates from these companies determine the tone of the WWE’s programming, its rating according to suitability for audience demographics, and also creative decisions regarding performers and narratives.

After signing a broadcasting deal with FOX, WWE was directed to make some thematic changes. Dave Meltzer of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* noted that “there are reports that FOX officials want *SmackDown* to be “less comedy and more in a sports direction” (Oestriecher, 2018), echoing the calls of fans to see more in-ring wrestling on WWE programming.

FOX also demanded that the well-received and commercially-successful character ‘The Fiend’ Bray Wyatt was on *SmackDown* (WhatCulture, 2019), which determined the WWE Draft of 2019, in which the WWE assigns its performers to be featured on either *Raw* or *SmackDown*. Similarly, if WWE airs content that ultimately does not reflect the values that FOX (or the USA Network) demand, the players of the ‘broadcast game’ have the authority to make changes (Prasad, 2020) or warn the players of the primary game to comply (Winnard, 2020). The ramifications of such a situation include the WWE being subjected to fines, non-renewal of their deals, or even cancellation of their shows.

The Impact of Politics on Wrestling Production

“At the local level [...] it is easier to look at the municipal government, its departments, and the agencies of state and national government as so many institutions, resembling banks, newspapers, trade unions, chambers of commerce, churches, etc, occupying a territorial field and interacting with one another. This interaction can be conceptualized as a system without reducing the interacting institutions and individuals to membership in any single comprehensive group” (Long, 1958, 251-52).

The interaction between games facilitates creative decisions made by WWE. The political workings of the system impose boundaries and restrictions on its operations, while also constructing a framework for the primary game to identify achievable goals and devise strategies to pursue them within the confines of the ecology. In this section, I will highlight two relatively recent examples of the WWE working the political system to produce content in particular locations. The second example will segue into the next section.

As part of the safeguards in response to the impact of Covid-19, the WWE was no longer able to travel to new cities every week to host *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT* from March 2020. Faced with the possibility of having to stop programming, the WWE relocated operations to its Performance Center in Orlando, Florida, airing empty arena shows without fans in attendance. However, regulations were still not in favor of the company to legally continue business. Thus, the primary game was forced to consider the players of the ‘political game’ and the mandates of the relevant authority.

In April 2020, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis declared the WWE an “essential service” in the state of Florida, with the official item on the list reading: “employees at professional sports and media production with a national audience” only if “the location is closed to the general public” (Zaveri, 2020). This ruling struck many people as problematic due to the proximity between two or more performers in the wrestling ring, increasing the risk of an outbreak of the virus. The political influence of McMahon and his wife, Linda, was brought into question, citing their large donations to the foundation of President Donald Trump. The same article by Mihir Zaveri for the *New York Times* carried a quote by Kyle Herrig, President of watchdog group Accountable, claiming it was “unfortunate but hardly surprising that corporate executives with close ties to President Trump are receiving special treatment from his allies. Like wrestling, the fix is in.” Leveraging political affiliations for the sustenance of business operations is an example of the ‘political game’ prevalent in the WWE’s ecology.

Another instance of the politics factoring into WWE’s production process is evident in its forays in Saudi Arabia, a country subjected to criticism due to its violations of LGBTQ equality, human rights, suppressing women’s rights, among other issues. In 2018, the WWE signed a 10-year deal with the government of Saudi Arabia to hold events there (English Alarabiya, 2018). WWE’s shows in Saudi Arabia have been critiqued by politicians, WWE fans, and even wrestlers employed by the WWE (Konuwa, 2018; Andersson, 2018; Oestriecher, 2020; Oliver, 2018). Despite political senators calling for the WWE to suspend their association with Saudi Arabia, WWE went ahead with their plans, also citing its support for Saudi Vision 2030. As of August

2020, the company has held five shows, the most recent one being *Super ShowDown 2020* in February 2020.

This highlights an event in which the primary game persists with its strategies, in spite of the efforts from other games to undermine its actions. In the same example, there are other games at play.

Gender Politics

WWE constantly negotiates with the various rules at play from these numerous domains that exercise some degree of control on its creative process. This is also true when it comes to enforcing gender stereotypes in some cases. WWE has been known to showcase “sociocultural attitudes towards gender dynamics through the use of its dramatic elements” (Fargiorgio, 2014, 19). WWE, to this day catering primarily to a male-dominated audience, has often followed the template of choosing male performers with the most muscular bodies to be given the main event spot in their card, which also informs its audience to intuitively associate such representations as ideal.

“By focusing upon muscular bodies, professional wrestling reinforces cultural pressures regarding what ‘real’ men should look like. Thus, for individuals who engage in viewing wrestling, or for those who want to work in wrestling, the presentation of the typical ideal body-builder type body may cause them to internalize certain attitudes towards body image” (Ibid., 18).

These observations made by scholars, fans, and performers alike have had both positive and negative results. Fans internalizing certain represented ideals on WWE programming have led to social trends of increased physical activities and healthy eating habits (Souillere and Blair, 2006). The primary game thus engages the attention of its audience by adjusting to trends or changes in the socio-political domain, i.e. if healthy eating is gaining traction, the WWE might produce segments focused on the eating habits of its performers who have impressive physiques. These negotiations can result in the formation of social movements and actualization of ideologies through narrative. A recent example can be found in WWE’s 2019 show *Crown Jewel*, held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on October 31, 2019, where WWE hosted the first-ever women’s professional wrestling match in the country of Saudi Arabia, eliciting plaudits for breaking gender stereotypes (BBC, 2019).

The role of women in professional wrestling has historically been sexualized and domesticized. Gregory Serrano, in his analysis of roles of female wrestlers in the 1990s, claims that “women coming into the business had little to no muscles, large breasts, and portrayed roles more commonly associated with domesticity, such as ‘standing by their man’ at the ring, rather than getting into the ring themselves” (Serrano 2016, 7). In 2001, Jenkins described the treatment of women in WWE as “a male dominant, sadistic sex fantasy” (Jenkins, 2005, 337). In keeping with this trend, even up to the mid-2010s, the predominant role of women continued to be described as “smart, sexy, and powerful” (WWE, 2010), also evident in the labeling of WWE’s female division as the Divas division. These marketing strategies point toward the portrayal of almost two separate roles (Jeanes, 2011; Kavoura, 2014). Labeling the women as divas – suggestive of their on-screen roles at that time – indicates the “conflict of roles for many female

grapplers who find it incredibly difficult to portray two seemingly contrasting personas for a largely male audience” (Serrano, 2016, 14).

This trend also manifested in kayfabe roles – matches involving the ‘divas’ were short, and did not frequently showcase the athleticism that would be associated with the sports aspect of professional wrestling. In 2015, WWE fans campaigned for female performers (then-known as ‘divas’) to be featured more prominently on television, using the hashtag #GiveDivasAChance (Twitter, 2020). This began the ‘Women’s Evolution’ (McMahon, S., 2018), a term born out continued WWE booking decisions to showcase the wrestling storytelling talent of its female roster, causing WWE to produce the first-ever women-only pay-per-view event called *Evolution* - an execution of a strategy to alter the balance of power. Emphasis shifted from sex appeal to athleticism, urging the primary game to move away from positioning its female performers as majorly glamorous and objectified, and serving as eye candy for the fans and merely complementing male competitors who were the focus of the story lines. The Women’s Evolution provided female performers with larger time slots to showcase their wrestling and storytelling skills in the wrestling ring. Last year, the WWE’s biggest annual show *WrestleMania* was headlined by female performers – the WWE also signed popular MMA fighter Ronda Rousey to enhance the cross-over appeal of the match and its narrative for the mainstream audience – for the first time ever, exemplifying change that can occur courtesy of fan input and adherence to socio-political trends. In 2020, two of the biggest stars in the WWE are women, namely Charlotte Flair and Becky Lynch (cf. Loke et al, 2015).

In the aforementioned example, the primary game responds to a disturbance in the ecology due to the demand for a change in gender portrayals in scripted programming by its fans. As explored in previous chapters, the communication between the primary game and its fans occurs on social platforms. Thus, in accordance with the activities of other games, WWE changes its strategies to reorient its operation toward success, with regards to its ecology. Satisfying the audience provides the WWE with “an elite and general public that is in varying degrees able to tell the score” (Long, 1958, 252).

The Social Game as Meta Game

“A final game that in a significant way integrates all the games in the territorial system is the social game. Success in each of the games can in varying degrees be cashed in for social acceptance” (Long, 1958, 261).

The social game relevant to the WWE has been discussed from the perspective of the fans in previous chapters. Communication with the various other games in the ecology allows the primary game to succeed and formulate more effective strategies. In this section, I will be looking at some instances where the WWE has had to make decisions based on the social actions of players from other games, or players from the WWE socializing with other games.

Managing Social Responses to Wrestlers’ Wellbeing

In a segment on his show *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver brought up issues with WWE’s treatment of its performers. The major areas highlighted were the labeling of wrestlers under contract as ‘independent contractors’, the lack of insurance afforded and adequate health protocols, absolution of WWE from many of the damages suffered by the performers while

working for the company, the workload of WWE performers, and the alarming number of premature wrestler deaths (Oliver, 2019).

Oliver explained that the performers – while being signed exclusively to the WWE to perform throughout the duration of the contract – were not treated as employees, thus making them exempt from employee benefits such as discrimination and occupational safety laws, retirement pensions, annual leave, and insurance coverage. These concerns have been voiced by retired wrestler Jesse Ventura, who wanted to unionize professional wrestling, while the hardships of being an independent contractor for the WWE and the reasons behind premature wrestling deaths have been highlighted in academic discourse (Schiavone, 2007; Herman et al, 2014). While the focus of Oliver’s segment is on the physical suffering and lack of regulation on welfare policies, there is also pre-existing work on the emotional labor involved with the occupation of being a professional wrestler (Smith, 2008), which can be linked to the general direction of Oliver’s appeal, especially the case of retired wrestler Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts.

“When you put all of this together, with wrestlers working as independent contractors, in a monopolized industry, largely free from meaningful oversight, and able to be fired at any time, you wind up with an environment with huge potential for unsafe conduct” (Oliver, 2019).

Citing the influence that fans exert on the WWE – who Oliver partially credited for vocally opposing the company’s dealings with Saudi Arabia and their usual treatment of female performers – Oliver oriented his illuminating piece toward the fans themselves. Also of note is the example of wrestling fans contributing to a GoFundMe campaign to play for retired wrestler Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts’ medical expenses – a testament to the extent of devotion that fans have towards these performers. Oliver emphasizes that “fans shouldn’t be the ones shouldering that responsibility” (Ibid.). With *WrestleMania 35* merely a week away, the appeal of Oliver’s segment came toward the end, urging the fans, saying, “if fans in that arena want (Vince) McMahon to help pay for wrestlers’ long-term healthcare or just to call them employees [...] I really hope they make their voices heard on this” (Ibid.).

The response to this segment came from media outlets (Konuwa; 2019; Nordyke, 2019; Locker, 2019), ex-employees and wrestlers from various companies (Dixon, 2019), and even the primary game itself. In an official statement, WWE stressed, “Prior to airing, WWE responded to his (Oliver’s) producers refuting every point in his one-sided presentation. John Oliver simply ignored facts. The health and wellness of our performers is the single most important aspect of our business, and we have a comprehensive, longstanding Talent Wellness program. We invite John Oliver to attend *WrestleMania* this Sunday to learn more about our company” (Parker, 2019).

This story attracted mainstream media attention, bringing together various games in WWE’s ecology of games. This is in line with the function of the social game that Long delineated. The social game is very relevant for WWE because communication and harmony with its various stakeholders is paramount for its sustenance in the ecology.

There are various examples to highlight how the social game impacts the WWE – the case studies from the previous chapters speak to that aspect as well. The social game has real-life implications. Interactions between games in the ecology have outcomes beyond the rules of the

game. These metagames are facilitated by social gaming, and all these games pay ‘dividend’ (positive or negatives). An example can be found in Randy Orton’s strategy to negotiate his most-recent contract with the WWE. WWE wrestlers, acting on either their kayfabe or real-life persona, play the social game on their social media accounts. Long-time WWE performer Randy Orton, around the end of his previous contract with WWE, started making posts hinting that he might sign with rival wrestling company All Elite Wrestling (AEW) (Orton, 2019), creating speculation that he might be leaving the WWE for this first time in his career. Journalists have alleged that Orton used this tactic to secure a better deal from the WWE itself (Surrao, 2019; Setto, 2020). Outcomes of social games can thereby become a resource for other games as well. A potential signing of Orton would have been a positive dividend for AEW, and that they weren’t able to achieve that outcome, and instead were used in Orton’s tactic, counts as a negative outcome. Another example of the social game is the firing of Paul Heyman from his former position of executive director after a dip in television ratings for *Raw*. However, narratives affecting the social perception and acceptance of the primary game are not limited to real-life texts. Wrestler Daniel Bryan, a vegan in real life at one point, was part of a story line where he forsook the traditional championship belt and chose a ‘vegan belt’ made entirely of jute, furthering his role as a real-life environmental activist and a social media influencer (Douglas, 2019), showcasing a performative aspect of his wrestling characters. The roles and agendas of players in the ecology, over time, lead to the formation of a framework in which all relevant games are about to implement their strategies and respond to the activities of other games. This aspect “provide(s) a vague set of commonly shared values that promotes cooperation in the system” (Long, 1958, 251). However, the games that affect or influence the primary game keep evolving based on its goals. The creative department of the WWE consists of writers from the genres of action-adventure, talk show, drama, sitcom, soap opera, film, et cetera (WWE Careers, 2019). The WWE does not only cooperate with other games, but also borrows from thematic elements from relevant games that can be integrated into the storytelling model.

The WWE continues to diversify its image and brand itself as a multimedia phenomenon. Chief Brand Officer of the WWE Stephanie McMahon, daughter of Vince McMahon, described WWE as – “when you think about the different facets of our business, we really are more akin to a Disney model than any other company because we are multimedia enterprise, but than we’re also CPG company (consumer products), we’re a billion-dollar brand of retail, [...] we have our films division, and hopefully that’s going to continue to grow” (2019).

The primary game is thus inculcating various genres of the entertainment industry in an attempt to diversify its modes of delivering a multimedia product that entertains in a more contemporary manner, as stated by Vince McMahon himself more than two decades ago (McMahon, 1997). For example, WWE promoted its Netflix content - *The Big Show Show* and *The Main Event* - featuring two of its performers, The Big Show and Kofi Kingston.

The ambiguous nature of WWE’s presentation is also evident in the perception of the people who represent the company.

“Individuals may play in a number of games, but, for the most part, their major preoccupation is with one, and their sense of major achievement is through success in one. Transfer from one game to another is, of course, possible, and the simultaneous playing of roles in two or more games is an important manner of linking separate games” (Long, 1958, 253).

An interview with Vince McMahon may give the impression that he is portraying his business persona, or his gimmick of 'Mr. McMahon', the on-screen kayfabe villain, or even the man behind those portrayals. While it can be argued that the latter is his major preoccupation - as Long explains in the aforementioned quote - through transmedia storytelling, these boundaries of these roles are blurred, and so is any hierarchy that may be derived from them. McMahon, being in a very prominent position in WWE, oversees its production contexts catering to various other games; it can be argued that he plays roles simultaneously, thus also linking those separate games. Smart fans who keep up with wrestling news outlets are aware of his reputation in play, and outside play. The same is true for performers whose professional lives are majorly associated with kayfabe and personal lives are on display to varying degrees on social media. However, as evident in the aforementioned examples, social games cause an overlap between both personas. Different games can correspond to different personas - Stephanie McMahon's roles as Chief Brand Officer, the face of 'Women's Evolution', villainous member of The Authority stable, the wife of wrestler Triple H, daughter of Vince McMahon, occasional wrestler, and spokesperson for the WWE have all been incorporated by the WWE at different times. Player mentalities pertaining to the different games can blend, which creates speculation and ambiguity regarding whether the narrative is situated in kayfabe or real life. Thus, these facets constantly inform the primary game, even in its interaction with other games in the ecology. The ecology of games metaphor allows us to contextualize WWE's real-life strategies, which inform the actions of groups that are associated with them, also affect kayfabe narratives, while also helping us to understand the other stakeholders and their roles in the territorial system that the primary game is situated in.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of the thesis, I will be looking at the objectives of these involved parties – fans, performers, and the WWE game itself – and how the game negotiates these desires to script narratives. There are two specific approaches taken in this thesis. The first two chapters treat fans as players exploring the world of kayfabe and its interplay with real life, which leads to the formation of transmedia narratives. The final chapter adopts Norton Long's 'Ecology of Games' metaphor, situating WWE as the primary game in a system among other games which contribute to its process of production and staging of shows, and outcomes of wrestling narratives and programming.

The game metaphors presented in the three chapters propose a different way of viewing the WWE as a transmedia phenomenon. The fans positioned as players, and the performers as characters in the game, gives an initial vantage point. Academic interest in professional wrestling is progressively getting focused on the transmedia space that narratives operate in, i.e. the ambiguity which informs the three domains of the game's narratives – kayfabe, real life, and its transmedia space that I have referred to as WWE's dominant fiction, its in-between domain. The in-between domain is the primary source of the ambiguity and uncertainty with regards to WWE's narratives where fans and performers, and even on-screen figures from the game interact. These interactions add layers of texts to WWE's transmedia story, further re-contextualizing the dominant fiction and its various interpretations.

While conducting discussions regarding the dynamic roles of the fans and performers, it is important to consider the goals of both, and how these align with the overall objective of the game itself. As argued above, The WWE can be interpreted in terms of games and play through multiple perspectives. The final section of the thesis will briefly summarize the main aspects of the three chapters.

Objectives for the Players, Performers, and the Game

Player Objectives

As unpacked in chapter 1, the fans can be interpreted as the players whose objective is to experience a satisfying performance of a wrestling narrative (but also perform their fandom of wrestling or individual athletes) – their desire to witness a good story being told through the spectacle of professional wrestling. The perspectives explored in the thesis reflect the connections between narratives in everyday life and kayfabe. Intersections of wrestling production with other societal domains are useful pertaining to the understanding of wrestling as a game, and rationalizing the behavior of both players and officials of the WWE. The dual experience of players (cf. Frissen et al, 2015, 18), witnessing wrestling for both critiquing and entertainment purposes constantly informs their behavior. The players voice what kind of game they want to play, and the game accommodates these insights to retain the consideration and interest of the players. The players perceive the game through their playful identity, and their drive is to witness narratives that are favorable according to them, i.e. they are engaged in the game to achieve self-gratification. They play by acting out their fan persona and are 'being played' (cf. Gadamer, 1989), by the way the game is set up. Obstacles to achieving this gratification automatically realize antagonistic status (in play). The hardships resulting from

these obstacles are designed by the script-writers to generate empathy for the heroic character around whom the narrative revolves. This subsequently enhances the connection of the player with the heroes ('faces'), villains ('heels'), the narrative, and the play world as a whole. These narratives have the potential to be socially provocative and politically meaningful. The narratives can depict and borrow imagery from real life in order to provide the players with a framework to emote feelings that are sourced from fiction, and expressed in real life, thus providing the possibility of a cathartic, empowering relationship with the spectacle of professional wrestling.

Performer Objectives

The objectives of the performers are those of 'workers', in that, they are the ones being compensated in financial terms and via exposure, both in the play world and the real world. Success for performers can be measured through many qualifiers. Roger Caillois claims in *Man, Play and Games* – "As for the professionals [...] who earn their living in the ring [...] and who must think in terms of prize, salary, or title, —it is clear that they are not players but workers. When they play, it is at some other game" (1958, 6). In kayfabe, the success of a wrestling character is very quantifiable – the number of championships won, winning percentage, accolades, et cetera. But these rewards are contingent on the real-life performance of the character by the performer. His personal success is measured in his wrestling talent, his portrayal of his gimmick, the memorable matches and story lines he is a part of, what his fellow performers have to say about his work, among other factors. These parameters determine quantifiable, scripted accolades in kayfabe. The performer gains additional perquisites based on popularity, as evident in the example of Bret Hart in the third chapter, where he was also afforded creative control over his wrestling character, i.e. he was given agency within the game. Popularity itself has plenty of quantifiers – if a wrestler features in the main event of a show, the ticket sales of that event indicate his popularity; the performer's social media followers, views on YouTube videos featuring him, the number of Google searches of him, et cetera. Thus, performers are also approaching multiple paths to 'win' or 'play' the game, which is dissimilar to the strategies and motivations of the fan.

Objectives of WWE producers

The WWE's objective is to craft narratives that fit the expectations of the players (fans) and also further the goals of the performers, to pursue its own overarching goals of financial success, mainstream media visibility, and constructing lasting memories through spectacular storytelling which unfolds on multiple platforms and domains (kayfabe, real-life, transmedia). Officials of the game strive to negotiate with officials of other games in order to produce shows and narratives that also fall in line with its obligations and compulsions with respect to other games. These officials can be conceptualized as players themselves once we adopt the ecology of games metaphor, wherein the WWE serves as the primary game. The primary game (WWE) must negotiate with players of other games in the process of pursuing its goals. Often, failure to do so has resulted in fans writing fantasy story lines in the play world, giving themselves creative control. This is but one example of the kind of activities fans can take up. These considerations also contribute to WWE's narrative production. The cumulative efforts culminate in the production of content which is the net result of all negotiations conducted by WWE with all the relevant parties, **maintaining the ecology and pursuing the objectives** of the game.

This brings me to the second half of this section. During 2020's Coronavirus pandemic, the WWE, in accordance with legal mandates, hosted shows in empty arenas for the first time in its existence. The production contexts change since the experience is not oriented to the live crowd, rather entirely to the audiences watching from their homes. As will be argued below, the game and play metaphors are also helpful to better understand these changes. This resulted in the company leaning heavily on the entertainment aspect of its production, focusing on cinematic segments featuring movie-style fight choreography and exaggerated form of wrestling storytelling. *WrestleMania 36*'s 'Boneyard Match' between The Undertaker and AJ Styles was set in a foggy graveyard instead of a wrestling ring, and showed The Undertaker easily overcoming ten enemies at once, using non-diegetic sound to serve as the soundtrack. These developments, along with other examples, suggest that the production of wrestling narratives could become even more complex. The influence of legal and political authorities, coupled with the goals of the WWE to maintain good relations with its stakeholders, make the ecology of games framework a useful lens to analyze this and other similar developments in the professional wrestling phenomenon.

Adapting to Changing Times

In this final section, I aim to highlight current production trends in the WWE landscape necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. Through two case studies and other observations, I will shed light on how the lack of live crowds and ticket revenues affects production values, and opens up various alternatives, most notably the cinematic matches, to entertain the television viewers in this new era of professional wrestling fandom.

While the WWE in 2020 continues to be one of the most popular multimedia companies in the world – WWE's *WrestleMania* ranks sixth in the world's most valuable sports event brands (Statista, 2019) – the pandemic forced the WWE to make significant changes to their production process and also personnel charged with the creative direction of their weekly programming. During March 2020, major sports leagues in America were paused, delayed, or canceled, including the MLB (Major League Baseball), MLS (Major League Soccer), NBA (National Basketball Association), and NHL (National Hockey League) (Luiz, 2020). However, the WWE resisted this trend by hosting events behind closed doors with no live crowds at their Performance Center in Orlando, Florida from March 13, 2020. Vince McMahon, Chairman and CEO of the WWE, has fostered a 'the show must go on' mentality in his employees and performers. This is evident in the social media posts made by performers and other employees in the days leading into *WrestleMania 36* (BBC, 2020), the first pay-per-view to be filmed behind closed doors and broadcast on tape-delay (Otterson, 2020; BBC, 2020).

However, the WWE's intentions to continue taping shows and broadcasting during the peak of the pandemic invited criticism from sports journalists, labeling the company as "a profit-first promotion" (Konuwa, 2020); representatives of the WWE defended this by emphasizing their goal to provide entertainment, calling it a "necessity, now more than ever" (Levesque, 2020). To continue operations during the outbreak of Covid-19, WWE had to consider mandates and restrictions from national bodies, guidelines from health agencies, assurances from television networks, the views of their staff and performers, and approval from the local government.

Given the volatile nature of these developments, the WWE is forced to adapt to the actions of other games following Long's theoretical framework. The disruptions arising due to the

Coronavirus present a challenge to established norms of the WWE game, forcing its officials and fans to re-think the game - first of all to come to terms with what characterizes the game that they're involved in in the first place. New conditions stipulate new rules of the game, pertaining to its operation and its guidelines from other games in the ecology. Questions arise regarding which parts of the game are still viable in the new system affected by the disruptions. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan claimed that "when the social rules change suddenly, then previously accepted social manners and rituals may suddenly assume the stark outlines and the arbitrary patterns of a game. [...] The older rituals of long accepted class behavior now begin to appear comic and irrational, gimmicks in a game" (1966, 238-239).

A case study that demonstrates this aspect of the WWE game is included as item III in the appendix.

Changing The WWE Production Game during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The old methods of staging WWE shows are relinquished due to these changes in social rules, making them seem game-like and artificial. This is becoming even more relevant with regards to risk management and adapting to the changing socio-political scenarios. Financial projections for WWE predicted a major loss for the company (Statista, 2020).

New strategies have to be devised within the new rules in order to experiment and discover new routes to attain the goals of the game. This adds yet another perspective to treating the WWE as a game. Unable to operate in its ecology as before the pandemic, the WWE is forced to discover which rules of the game still apply, which parts of the game are still viable. The societal shifts in the wake of the biological disruption cause a sudden change in practices and values, which make the old system game-like. The WWE, in line with Vince McMahon's 'the show must go on' adage, tries to adapt to the harsh changes, which potentially lead to remediation of the auratic qualities of wrestling performance as well (cf. Botler et al, 2006).

After **gaining the status of an 'essential service'**, WWE began holding events at the Performance Center, shifting to the format of taping multiple episodes of their weekly shows *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT* in a day for the convenience in organization and planning, also allowing on-site personnel and performers to manage their schedules and travel arrangements, the latter being especially relevant due to the travel restrictions present at the time (Satin, 2020). However, to deliver on the contractually-obligated number of annual live shows with broadcasting networks FOX and NBC Universal (parent company of the USA Network), WWE returned to live tapings of their shows. This was done to prevent any financial change in their contracts with the networks. According to *Wrestling Inc.*, it was only after the same amount of revenue was ensured by broadcasters FOX and NBC Universal that WWE returned to taping its shows (Gagnon, 2020).

This brings me to the **precautions that WWE had to take**, i.e. measures taken by the game to accommodate the impact of legal and medical rules that dictate its production, to meet the standards set by the concerned medical agencies. The WWE began producing empty-arena shows after large public gatherings were banned in March 2020, risking negative public image, with wrestling journalist Black Oestriecher writing, "McMahon moved forward with the [*WrestleMania 36*] in a risky move that will cost him a ton of money and [this] only further

proves that he's lost his grasp on what WWE fans want" (2020). Restrictions were placed upon individuals who had been abroad or come in contact with someone who had been outside the country. The company conducted **temperature checks** on performers before entering the Performance Center and asked them to fill out a form (Bajpal, 2020) inquiring about any symptoms that they might have. However, after some personnel with symptoms tested positive for Covid-19 (**failed risk management measures** necessitating new steps), WWE began **testing specifically for the virus** before every television production (Reavis, 2020).

From March 13 to May 25, no crowd was allowed inside the Performance Center, while later a limited number of WWE *NXT* trainees were allowed to attend tapings. WWE performer Kevin Owens reportedly was the driving behind making face masks mandatory for those in attendance at the tapings (Barrasso, 2020) – another instance of a **performer influencing the rules and policies of WWE' production**.

It is important to note that the crowd in attendance was comprised of WWE trainees – talents hoping to earn performer contracts – who were urged to engage with the events in the ring through scripted utterances, thus **performing the role of a live crowd**, allowing live crowd reactions to be under the purview of the WWE's creative control for the first time in its broadcast existence. This also serves as an example of a unique type of ambiguity that has characterized the wrestling experience before and continues to intensify that aspect. With the WWE simulating the fan element of the WWE experience, 'fan reaction' becomes a part of the diegetic premise of professional wrestling. The game is afforded even more control over the narrative. There is no transgressive play from the fans, i.e. the possibility of cheering, booing, and behaving in opposition to what the script suggests since the 'fans' in attendance are more akin to workers, making all fan activity simply another extension of the story line unfolding in the wrestling ring.

WrestleMania 36 in April 2020 marked the first major WWE event to be held behind closed doors. For the final case studies, I will be looking into how the WWE has managed to deal with adversity and continues to adapt to the new rules in its ecology.

Post-WrestleMania 36

At *WrestleMania 36*, the first major event impacted by the safety measures, WWE performer Roman Reigns, slated to compete for the WWE Universal Championship at the event, backed out citing health reasons, while Mike 'The Miz' Mizanin was absent from taping due to doctors' orders, and Andrade was listed as injured. Many other performers were quarantined in the following weeks, making the WWE susceptible to unplanned absences from performers due to Covid-19 symptoms manifesting in the performers or someone in their households. Post-*WrestleMania* season of the WWE calendar tends to draw fewer viewers and eyeballs to WWE programming. This year, that trend was maximized by the Coronavirus pandemic, resulting in record lows in ratings (Featherstone, 2020).

In order to deal with these consequences, the WWE made some strategic changes to its production, some of which I will be highlighting through two case studies. These case studies showcase experimentation with available production techniques, and convergence of various other media and entertainment productions. With high-profile performers absent after *WrestleMania 36* – such as The Undertaker (hiatus/retirement), Brock Lesnar (hiatus) Roman Reigns (immunocompromised), Becky Lynch (pregnancy), Bray Wyatt (personal leave of absence), and later Charlotte Flair (injury). The goal is associated with resource management -

how the WWE repackages and combines available resources to execute creative storytelling arcs, framing WWE production in terms of bricolage (cf. Kincheloe, 2001).

Edge vs. Randy Orton – “The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever”

I have cited this match earlier in Chapter 3 in association with the concept of System Gaming due to its marketing as the “Greatest Wrestling Match Ever”. Here, the focus is on the production of the match itself, rather than its marketing. The first pay-per-view after *WrestleMania 36*, called *Backlash*, focused on the rematch between WWE Hall of Famer Edge (a.k.a Adam Copeland) and Randy Orton (a.k.a. Randall Keith Orton). At *WrestleMania*, Edge beat Orton in a Last Man Standing match. The former was cleared for competition after nine years of retirement forced by a real neck injury, and the latter was the biggest household name at the WWE’s disposal. The WWE was capitalizing on the emotional return of one of its most decorated champions in the form of Edge, and the acclaimed villainous narrative of Orton entering the match. Their rematch was originally planned for August’s *Summerslam*, but it was moved forward to June due to the absence of many other stars.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, WWE marketed the upcoming rematch as ‘The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever’ (WWE, 2020), marking one of the rare instances in recent memory that the word ‘wrestling’ was mentioned on WWE programming (Rodriguez, 2020) - a potential alteration in a marketing rule from a production standpoint.

In the play world, the narrative leading up to the match centered around this being Edge’s first pure wrestling match in nearly a decade, and his doubt over his abilities. This narrative also combined texts from real life and kayfabe, as had been the case even before *WrestleMania*, which focused more on the shared history between the two wrestlers. The kayfabe element was manifest in Orton’s intention to send Edge back to retirement for the latter’s own good, before “someone [...] puts [Edge] in a wheelchair or worse” (Orton, 2020).

For *Backlash 2020*, the ‘Greatest Wrestling Match Ever’ was pre-taped, and broadcast on the night of the event with 33 WWE trainees serving as fans in attendance. Both Edge and Orton were given **elaborate introductions**, with the referee wearing a retro uniform. The match featured some facets of augmented reality such as ‘**sweetened**’ crowd audio – a tactic to enhance the cheers and boos of the live crowd – to give the impression of a massive live crowd in attendance (Thomas, 2020). Moreover, **innovative camera angles** were used to give an additional aesthetic layer. The match was a landmark in the learning curve of WWE for using these tactics to give the television audience a different, enhanced experience (McMahon, S., 2020), using the restrictive conditions as an opportunity to discover new methods to engage with its audience. These techniques also redefine the ‘operational aesthetic’ (cf. Mittell, 2009), causing smart fans to re-learn parts of the game that are being altered or experimented with.

The ‘Greatest Wrestling Match Ever’ (WWE, 2020) match itself showcased the narrative of Edge slowly overcoming his doubt and matching Orton move-for-move. Both wrestlers executed classic wrestling grapples, their respective signature moves, and also maneuvers of other legends for over forty minutes – **much longer than the traditional wrestling match**. The finishing sequence of the match saw Orton deliver the illegal low blow to Edge (unseen by the referee), followed by the rare Punt Kick to seal the victory. The story of the match focused on Edge’s

doubt, and Orton's willingness to bend the rules to win. After winning, Randy Orton told Edge that he could return to his family now, as was Orton's intention in kayfabe.

The match caught the attention of fans, speculating about whether the match lived up to its billing, analyzing the promo and in-ring performances of Edge and Orton, the potential disadvantages of using exaggerated hype to sell the *Backlash* pay-per-view, the added elements of enhanced audio and creative camera angles, et cetera, thus retaining audience interest during a typically low period of the WWE calendar made even more challenging due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thus, the game adapted to the changing conditions, modifying some rules of the game, which urges fans to also consider other metagames that bring about these changes. From an informed vantage point, fans can appreciate the strategies adopted by the game in response to disruptions in its traditional production values.

A final case study showcasing another developing trend in WWE – an accentuated rendition of some of the experiments evident in the aforementioned case study – during March-August 2020, a period that has been affected heavily by the Covid-19 pandemic, is included as item IV of the appendix.

Limitations of the thesis and corresponding suggestions for further research

In this final section of the thesis, I will be considering the approach I have taken to unpack the mediated professional wrestling phenomenon while acknowledging its limitations and potential drawbacks.

I would like to address that conceptualizing WWE as a game and using various game and play metaphors is not without flaws. Sometimes play concepts are applied and used indiscriminately, making it so that the use of games as a metaphor appears forced. Also, rendering wrestlers as transmedia characters and the WWE as a game opens up the possibility of imposing this perspective liberally. Specific and intelligible application of these concepts is important to add something meaningful, which I hope to have done.

My methodology is grounded in netnographic and textual analysis of materials that support the hypothesis, and from the third chapter onwards, the focus is on the production context of WWE narratives through the Ecology of Games metaphor. The treatment of fans as players is based on the ways in which they are contributing to the transmedia storytelling model of the WWE. My observations and treatment of fans are made by investigating historical fan performance and also how fans play their roles within WWE fandom using the digital platforms where WWE's transmedia story is majorly situated. The methodology does not focus on what the fans think of their own roles, and how they identify themselves while interacting with various platforms WWE hosts. Therefore, I have abstained from commenting too much on the personal individual desires of the fans, since that is not the focus of this thesis. Taking a survey-driven or sociological approach to analyzing identity performance could bridge that gap and help understand some of the internal motivations of fans, i.e. looking at their identity performance in practice from their own perspective. There is scope for deliberate ethnographic research to get a more detailed understanding of fans as a part of player communities. This might also prove useful to find

whether there is a rhetoric of game is already present in discussions among WWE fans or executives, which might indicate their potential awareness and/or acceptance and/or denial of the game metaphor. Self-reflexive accounts from fans can inform us about their views on their personal strategies that dictate their behavior, and also on whether they feel they are being included enough in the ‘participatory culture’ (cf. Jenkins, 2006) that playful transmedia storytelling promotes. Some exciting approaches to research into the performance of wrestling might be through detailed dialogue with WWE performers and producers regarding the construction of wrestling matches, and the reasons for including certain mannerisms and moves at particular points – this will also lend nuance to my observation from the second chapter that, inside the ring, there is a language that informs the physicality and gestures, which draws upon the semiotic standard governing wrestling performance, all done to serve the overarching narratives.

What I have tried to develop through this thesis is a more holistic approach to mediatized professional wrestling, unpacking various game metaphors in order to broaden the scope of its understanding. The complex transmedial phenomenon of professional wrestling continues to get embedded deeper into contemporary culture. I hope that my framing proves valuable.

Appendix

I. CM Punk's Pipe Bomb - Speculation through Uncertain Character Performance

In the first case study of Chapter 2, the players were informed of real-life events by a performer outside the scope of the play world. What created speculation is when those real-life texts started to get integrated into the play world, leaving the players uncertain about how much of the kayfabe narratives were scripted. In this case study, the process of informing the players was the point of origin of ambiguity. Understanding Wrestling as a game can help explain its contemporary manifestations, as in this case.

Situating the segment in the play world of WWE, wrestling scholar Christian Norman writes, “[The Pipe Bomb] was featured as a part of the narrative world of wrestling, delivered by a narrator character for the narrative audience. In this manner, Punk’s pipe bomb addressed the narrative audience as if they were “smar[k]s,” which marked a major shift in WWE’s dominant narrative mode” (Norman, 2017, 122). The shift alluded to above is the tailoring of wrestling narratives to the smart players, taking for granted their knowledge of rules of the game. To explain this facet holistically, I will provide some narrative context.

“There is a glass ceiling, and nobody is allowed to break it. That’s the simple story of this place – the more popular you are, the more money you make. Why do you think [...] John Cena [...] gets title shot after title shot?” (Punk, 2013)

In the summer of 2011, CM Punk’s contract with the WWE was coming to an end. At the time, he was portraying a villainous character, embroiled in a rivalry with the WWE Champion and mainstream attraction John Cena. With a championship match looming, on June 27, 2011, Punk, a.k.a. Phil Brooks, interfered in a match featuring Cena and cost him the victory. Punk, now seated cross-legged on the entrance ramp, went on to deliver a monologue that has since been dubbed ‘The Pipe Bomb’. The entire setup was dissimilar to other promotional segments where performers are in the ring delivering to a particular rival a set of scripted lines of communication with emotion appropriate to the story line. With the premier superstar in the company recovering in the ring, Punk seemingly dropped character and acknowledged that they exist in a scripted world dictated by politics and favoritism. Borrowing several texts from real life, he voiced his grievances regarding his position in the company, christening himself “the best in the world” (Punk, 2011). He claimed to have been the victim of being overlooked by the WWE and **vowed to leave the company after beating John Cena for the WWE Championship.**

“There’s one thing you’re better at than I am, and that’s kissing (Chairman) Vince McMahon’s ass. [...] I hate this idea that you’re the best. [...] I’m the best in the world. [...] No matter how many times I prove it, I’m not on the cover of the program. I am barely promoted [...] I don’t get to be in movies; I am not on the poster of WrestleMania. [...] This isn’t sour grapes, but the fact that Dwayne (The Rock) is in the main event of WrestleMania and I’m not makes me sick” (Ibid.).

Punk revolted against corporate machinations, politics, preferential treatment to certain performers due to their stature, and an ignorance toward his work ethic, evident in his absence from promotional materials, cross-over projects, and the marquee match of the biggest show on

the WWE calendar, *WrestleMania*. He vehemently disapproved of the main spot of the show being given to Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson, a Hollywood actor and former WWE star, who had started an ongoing, high-profile rivalry with John Cena at the time.

Punk chided the nepotism that shaped the power structure in the company, claiming that he would “like to think that maybe this company would be better after Vince McMahon’s dead, but [...] it’s going to get taken over by his idiotic daughter and his doofus son-in-law, and the rest of his stupid family” (Ibid.). The individuals referenced are the Chairman and C.E.O of WWE, his daughter, and son-in-law, each of whom holds considerable controlling interest in the company.

In terms of established practices of the game being broken, Punk called himself the best ‘wrestler’ in the world – a word WWE has avoided using since it’s focus on the entertainment portion of its presentation. He openly acknowledged that he was ‘breaking the fourth wall’, and went on to mention several independent professional wrestling companies live on WWE programming – a sacrilegious act that broke the regulations of kayfabe.

“Punk uses these moments as textual “winks” at hardcore wrestling fans, who would likely catch his insider references. Punk’s promo further maintains a second persona of casual fans who would likely not get the subtext behind these cues but would still understand that Punk was criticizing WWE production” (Norman, 2017, 123).

To the cheering fans in attendance, Punk said, “**You are just as big a part of me leaving as anything else** because you’re the ones [...] that buy those programs that my face isn’t on the cover of” (Punk, 2011), birthing **speculation** about whether the segment was indeed a ‘shoot promo’, i.e. a monologue that is unscripted (Quora, 2016). In this case study, the performer *seemingly* shows a lack of willingness to “keep to the rules” (Huizinga, 1949, 208), playing the role of a “spoilsport” (Ibid.) who threatens the “integrity of the system” (Ibid.).

Coining all the various transgressions that Punk, as a WWE character, committed during the promo ‘TV sins’, J.King of Medium.com reviewed the segment as follows:

“This was another aspect of the Pipe Bomb promo that made it work so well, it was full of lines and TV sins that are never supposed to happen. You’re not supposed to break character on TV, you’re not supposed to talk trash about your network, and you’re definitely not supposed to complain about your own fans. This perfect storm of rage and rule-breaking is why the Pipe Bomb promo is the landmark WWE moment that it is” (King, 2019).

The Pipe Bomb served to launch what players later labeled the ‘Summer of Punk’ (Beaston, 2020). The term reflects the players’ historical knowledge since Punk’s original ‘Summer of Punk’ took place in 2005 with the promotions Ring of Honor (ROH). The coining of 2011’s ‘Summer of Punk’ also demonstrates the engagement of players by emulating the prevalent rhetoric and rule-system of the game. The WWE calendar begins after *WrestleMania* in the Spring, leading to a relatively-quiet post-*WrestleMania* period; in June, story lines are focused to culminate or peak at ‘The Biggest Party of the Summer’, *SummerSlam*.

Punk’s ‘Pipe Bomb’ in June paved the way for his ‘push’ up the card in the summer of 2011, and also many segments where Punk would engage in dialog and action in the same mold, such as Punk leveraging his position to bargain for an extremely lucrative contract in the process verbally abusing Chairman Vince McMahon in the ring and gaining his status of ‘The Voice of the Voiceless’ - an instance of an in-game character receiving a special attribute. The game

incorporated the criticism from Punk into the narrative. What needs to be pointed out is that even by breeding ambiguity, the primary drive of the WWE game is to get players talking, for them to buy into the story line, and then buy the pay-per-view. All of Punk's actions, whether or not precisely motivated by the script, were designed to generate interest for the Cena vs. Punk match for the WWE Championship. All these texts taken from real life and applied to the play world ultimately deepen immersion of the player – speculation fosters theorizing, leading to further texts added to WWE's transmedia story by smart players trying to achieve more from the game, to see if their understanding of the game yields correct estimations about the game's future narrative and creative direction. And this can only be achieved by buying the program that the game is selling to the players. In these ways, meta, and seemingly meta-narratives challenge the intelligence of the player, thus keeping him engaged to find out he is indeed as smart as he thinks he is, also relevant to Bartle's player typologies, i.e. challenging 'achievers' (cf. Bartle, 2005). This is in service of player immersion, what Sharon Mazer defines as the wrestling fan's interest in discerning what is real (a 'shoot') from what is a part of the scripted storyline ('a work') (Mazer, 2020).

II. Daniel Bryan's YES Movement - Players as Supporting Characters in the Play World

In the third case study, support for a performer caused player outrage when the performer's kayfabe narrative did not afford him the place in the game that the players believed he should occupy. The vocal revolt of the players manifested itself in WWE's transmedia story, coupled with the burgeoning underdog narrative in real life. This essentially forced the game to script the character's narrative to mirror the players' real-life impression of the performer; however, the obstacles in the way were significant and plenty, directing the real-life displeasure of the players towards 'heel' characters in the game standing in the way of their underdog 'face' hero (Canella, 2016).

By January 2014, wrestler Daniel Bryan was in the middle of a high-profile narrative in which he had been wronged by the villainous faction 'The Authority', spearheaded by Triple H. In late 2013, Bryan had dethroned long-time WWE Champion John Cena; however, he was soon attacked by Triple H, who then paved the way for fellow Authority member Randy Orton to win the Championship from Bryan, setting up the latter for a sympathetic babyface narrative. Even after winning the title back, Bryan was stripped of it by The Authority. Bryan's popularity was also evident in thousands of fans chanting his signature catchphrase "Yes!" during segments he was featured in. For any display of defiance against The Authority, Bryan was beaten down at the hands of The Authority's goons and Orton. Being outnumbered further fed the sympathetic tendencies of the players towards Bryan. At *Royal Rumble 2014*, Bryan was the most-favored 'face' wrestler in the running to win the 30-man Royal Rumble match (Giri, 2014) which would have guaranteed him a place in the WWE Championship match at that year's *WrestleMania 30*, the biggest show of the year. However, during the match, Bryan did not even make an appearance, which was met with loud boos from the live crowd.

"Bryan's growth in popularity approaching the 2014 Royal Rumble [...] caused WWE to change the card and include a way for him to be booked in the top match" (Porter, 2020).

The Authority continued to position Randy Orton as the 'Face of the WWE'. During Orton's matches, the crowd chanted Bryan's name without any scripted prompts. Bryan acknowledged

his undeniable popularity to The Authority, collectively calling his supporters the YES movement, and asked to be given an opportunity to earn consideration for the championship. The Authority refused, and instead labeled him a ‘B+ player’, who did not “measure up”.

“You don’t listen to the YES movement; you don’t listen to their obvious desire to see [...] people like me succeed” (Bryan, 2014).

Bryan continued to experiment with the performative possibilities of his everyman persona, positioning himself as an agent of the people’s wishes, while **directly referencing the fans as part of what he represented**, positioning the ‘implied player’ (cf. Aarseth, 2014) as an everyman, a regular common person deprived of ample opportunity to succeed. On the March 10, 2014 episode of WWE RAW, Daniel Bryan and his YES movement staged the ‘OccupyRAW’ segment (cf. Canella, 2016). With a gang of his followers in and around the ring - fans performing the roles of supporting characters in the play world - effectively hijacking the show (cf. Norman, 2017, 165), Bryan demanded that Triple H accept his challenge for a match at WrestleMania 30, with the added stipulation that if he won, he would compete for Randy Orton’s WWE World Heavyweight Championship in the main event of *WrestleMania 30*. Triple H attempted to have the ring cleared, only to have the entire arena chant ‘No!’ back at him.

“This is the problem [...] You underestimate the power of these people. [...] We own this ring” (Bryan, 2014)

Wrestling scholar Eero Laine claimed that this story arc “highlights the ways that professional wrestling [...] is reliant on the live event, the actions of spectators, and the intricate connections between theatrical entertainment and finance” (2019). Ultimately, Triple H accepted Bryan’s terms. At WrestleMania 30, Bryan beat Triple H and later prevailed in the main event to raise the WWE World Heavyweight Championship on his shoulders to close out the show, with the live crowd on their feet, pouring out their adulation in celebratory jubilation.

In this case study, the speculation was not regarding which world the narrative was situated; it was regarding whether the WWE would incorporate the texts from real life that the players clearly wanted to see being mirrored in kayfabe. The players had several platforms to demonstrate this playful desire, including chanting ‘Yes!’ and ‘No!’ along with Bryan, participating in his YES Movement, producing social media content, voicing their opinions and contributing to WWE’s transmedia story, et cetera. The players were referenced, and invited to actively participate in the story arc. This marks one of the most documented instances of the players effecting significant change in the WWE narrative.

III. The Undertaker’s *The Last Ride*

This anecdote is in service of the aforementioned idea that sudden changes in rules of the game make older structures and rituals appear artificial and game-like. The Undertaker character has been called “the epitome of what professional wrestling aspires to be” (Raven, 2017). The Undertaker, a.k.a. Mark Calaway, outlined his motivations for preserving and subscribing to WWE’s main aesthetic rule by saying, “I have tried my hardest to protect kayfabe. [...] I would cringe when I would hear people, like we’re doing now, talking openly about behind the scenes stuff. I just really enjoyed that era. [...] The honor among thieves mentality” (Calaway, 2020).

The above quote is from an interview after the release of his documentary *The Last Ride*, which offered fans a look at the man behind the character of The Undertaker for the first time in his 30-year-long career. *The Last Ride* was released in parts from May to July 2020, in the middle of WWE's pandemic era, and promoted on WWE's digital platforms as well as flagship programming – *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT*. The documentary was even used to further ongoing story lines between current performers, thus used as an integrated marketing tool for the company.

Renowned for never breaking character – even to the extent that he often themed his real-life clothing similar to that of his kayfabe persona. Calaway indirectly alluded to the role that social media has played in pulling the curtain on kayfabe, citing the reaction of some of his fans upon his eventual entry into the social media platform.

“I think I was the real last hold out to kayfabe and it's funny. I was probably the last guy to social media too. I remember I posted something, I don't even remember what it was. I normally don't do this, I don't normally look at comments, but I was kind of scrolling through and there was a comment that said, 'My childhood is dead. The Undertaker is now on social media. It's all over.' I'm thinking to myself, 'You're right, I'm sorry man!' That's my instincts, and it took a while to work through that” (Ibid.).

The Undertaker's appearance on social media can be treated as the official breaking of the sacred rule of kayfabe. Calaway's dedication to his character and the preservation of kayfabe continued through the rise of social media and its effect on the professional wrestling industry. The imbrication of the play world and the real world, as explored in previous chapters, is facilitated by interaction among fans, performers, officials, critics, journalists, and even those exposed to professional wrestling references in popular culture. The documentary exemplifies what the WWE is now: a transmedia entity (Sciaretta, 2019; Ford, 2016), and how it increasingly accommodates real-life texts, signaling the fall of WWE's rule of preserving kayfabe, favoring “spreadable” (cf. Jenkins, 2009) content even at the expense of breaking the ‘fourth wall’. This aids in WWE programming functioning as equal parts theater, soap opera, choreographed violence, operating within an ecology allowing it to benefit from cross-cultural relevance, and pursue mainstream media appeal.

The Undertaker's documentary included interviews from various performers, critics, officials, members of the McMahon family, along with Calaway and his wife, ex-wrestler Michelle McCool; the documentary covered the last three years of The Undertaker's career, detailing Calaway's struggles with injuries, contemplating retirement while simultaneously fighting to prove himself in the latter stages of his career, right up until potentially his last match – ‘The Boneyard Match’ – taking place at *WrestleMania 36* against AJ Styles, a.k.a. Alan Jones. In the build-up to the match, Styles chided The Undertaker for being on social media, and mentioned Calaway's wife, thus introducing texts of real life and kayfabe domains, directing the narrative toward the in-between, transmedia domain of WWE storytelling. The Undertaker, in response to Styles, claimed to bring ‘The Unholy Trinity’ to their upcoming match – an amalgamation of three characters: wrestling gimmicks ‘The Phenom’ and ‘The American Badass’ (closer to Calaway's real persona), and Calaway's real life persona.

IV. Cinematic Matches

The Undertaker's final match was WWE's first foray at *WrestleMania* into what has been labeled as a 'cinematic' match. Described as "your classic wrestling match enhanced by a different location, theatrics, and some quality background music to give the fight a big-time feel" (Tiwari, 2020). Cinematic matches are an amalgamation of sports entertainment, theater, and film – a trinity in its own right. From January to July 2020, the WWE aired seven cinematic matches, as compared to just two before that.

Cinematic matches do not require a live crowd – ideally suited to the restrictive guidelines courtesy the pandemic – primarily because these matches are rarely contested in the wrestling ring. The Undertaker's cinematic match was held in a graveyard, fitting to his wrestling persona. The general rules of a wrestling match do not apply to its cinematic counterpart. Exaggerated selling and manic mannerisms are a consistent feature of the presentation. In his *WrestleMania 36* match, The Undertaker took on multiple druids, henchmen of his opponent Styles, and Styles himself. The Undertaker's use of supernatural powers was also showcased, evident in his reincarnation mid-match from a losing position to eventually win.

The cinematic match inculcates aspects of theater and film, in line with WWE's ongoing narratives. Professional wrestling has also played around with the conventions of the genre. Rather than downplaying the reliance on theater, corona challenges the pre-existing conventions. Kayfabe is integrated into the WWE's gamespace more emphatically, which usually did not happen. The wrestling ring is no longer a neutral environment; in the case of cinematic matches, kayfabe is now woven into the ring. The established norms are being challenged and new avenues are being pursued since the WWE game is not able to conduct story lines as before, causing the company to re-invent itself again, providing different production contexts even within the same play world.

Even during radical re-thinking and experimenting, the transmedia storytelling model accommodates the participatory culture of WWE fandom, allowing for new productions that invite near-instantaneous feedback from the public, claimed by Stephanie McMahon. "I think our audiences are willing to allow us to experiment a little bit as sports leagues, as brands [and] as entertainment. I think it gives them [...] a voice and to be part of the process, to empower them to give them the feedback that we need on what's working and what's working. On what they like and don't like. [...] What we've really done is pivot. We've pivoted from that live event experience to creating and producing content across all platforms." (McMahon, S., 2020). The shift in WWE's focus areas is dictated initially by the restrictive mandates from medical and legal organizations, while the process of re-invention is driven by fan feedback and further exploration of production possibilities and contexts.

The success and critical acclaim of 'The Boneyard Match' prompted the WWE to book more cinematic matches, testing creative ideas and assessing fan feedback, urging the game to discover and approach the 'new normal'. Triple H, a.k.a Paul Levesque, one of the creative forces behind 'The Boneyard Match', claimed, "The new normal will be what is normal. It's not going to be what it was before. [...] And for us, in some ways, the opportunity of doing these shows without fans and doing *WrestleMania* [with] these off-site shoots will open our eyes to different ways of doing things that we maybe didn't see before and will change the product probably for the better in the long run" (Levesque, 2020). Thus, some outcomes of necessitated

experimentation resulted in innovative, well-received modes of production, which are primed to alter the rules of the games and offer new rules of interaction and gameplay opportunities for the fans.

These case studies are an effort to show some of the ways that the WWE is adapting to the necessitated changes. Some of these strategies reflect how WWE's game-like operation is affected by real-life occurrences. The primary hypothesis acts as an integrated metaphor, encompassing the various play and game metaphors used in this thesis. I have presented this framing to offer a new lens to approach the mediatized professional wrestling phenomenon, and to re-orient, re-assess, re-position the function of fans, performers, officials and WWE itself, which might allow us to better conceptualize this ever-changing and ever-growing transmedia phenomenon.

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