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# **Breaking Kayfabe – Professional Wrestling in the key of Erving Goffman**

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## **Abstract:**

For several decades, professional wrestling audiences have been aware of the predetermined nature of the 'sport'. Despite this, the theatrical genre of professional wrestling still relies on the insistence of its own legitimacy, a concept internally referred to as 'kayfabe'. This thesis explores the phenomenon of kayfabe by identifying the various gimmicks that help define professional wrestling as a form of theatre instead of sport, and by tracking the implementation and understanding of kayfabe within the American professional wrestling industry from historical to postmodern context. This is achieved by analysis of professional wrestling through Erving Goffman's understanding of 'keying': a device used to transform activity from one collective understanding to another. It becomes clear that the movement from legitimate sporting action to premeditated, melodramatically amplified combat stems from an insecurity surrounding the fiscal feasibility of wrestling remaining legitimate, and the emerging presence of 'kayfabled' behaviour to sustain the 'legitimacy' of the fabrication produces a simulation of sporting celebrity that can be controlled and manipulated at will, seeking the organic acceptance of the presented narrative from the willing consumer. Through further academic analysis of professional wrestling, and the interrogation of the spectacle through the work of Goffman, kayfabe within professional wrestling could potentially be defined as the keying of impression management into the theatrical framing of the kayfabe lamination, and continued analysis of kayfabe in this light may help us to further understand the consumerist nature of celebrity culture as a whole.

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## **Introduction to professional wrestling and kayfabe**

Professional wrestling is a performance art practice, simultaneously theatrical in its athletic presentation as it is sporting according to its own defining terms. With the business model of touring companies that in practice have operated not too dissimilar to their carnivalesque predecessors, the performance claims to be a real combat sport basing its vital dramaturgical output on the physicality and conflict of the wrestlers. Originally based on the medieval sport of pugilism before its transition to predeterminism, the catch wrestling foundations combined with martial arts and circus influences carry a narrative quality that tell the story of good versus evil through the metaphor of a combat sport promotion. The winners of matches are decided in advance, with the full cooperation and awareness of all performers involved, from wrestlers, to referees, to commentary, to the spectators. Central to this setup is the notion of 'kayfabe', loosely defined by David Shoemaker as "the wrestlers' adherence to the big lie, the insistence that the unreal is real" (Shoemaker, 2013, p 15). Activity 'in' kayfabe refers to the dramaturgical or hyperbolic activity of the performers that in turn builds the internal logic of the kayfabe world the wrestlers compete in; things that contradict the logic and/or expose the fabrication of the kayfabe during performance can range from a 'botched' sequences of moves to misguided or ineffective dramaturgical application. Similarly, the instability of real life can infringe on the kayfabe externally, evidenced through events such as legitimate injury sustained mid-performance or otherwise, and the acknowledgement of interpersonal relationships in contradiction to the kayfabe narrative. Arguments have arisen as to whether we live in a 'post-kayfabe' world due to the open acknowledgement of wrestling's scripted nature in today's technologically advanced media climate; if everyone, including the people that watch, is aware of wrestling's predetermined nature, then where does the appeal of this simulation of sport actually lie? No longer is the fakery of professional wrestling an unspoken secret, it remains today as simply a given fact, and defining professional wrestling as theatre instead of sport allows for the

“rules of the game” (Mazer, 1998, p 27) to be analysed and cemented without the complications of the “official face of activity” (Goffman, 1986, p 126) contradicting what we as, ultimately, fans, already knew.

Various definitions and comprehensions of kayfabe exist within professional wrestling research, but all somewhat refer to the performative function of the wrestling event.

Benjamin Litherland states that kayfabe:

“...refers to the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life. At its most basic, kayfabe fundamentally means presentation of wrestling as a legitimate sporting competition rather than theatrical entertainment. As a concept, however, kayfabe sits centrally as one of wrestling’s defining pleasures and modes of entertainment, complicating many of the above pleasures and complaints, and ‘[eluding] moral and academic authority’” (Litherland, 2018, p 101).

Considering this, I will be exploring the evolution of kayfabe within professional wrestling from historical to postmodern context, noting the scattered implementations of dramaturgy that transformed professional wrestling from a combat sport practiced by the working class, to a genre of performance that takes elements of its original appeal, fusing them with elaborate dramaturgy that helps build an uncanny world in which the spectator can enter and interact with as if the dramatic action taking place was, indeed, real, purely on the basis that the presentation of it claims to be real. This examination will be complimented by the work of Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, with explicit reference to *Frame Analysis*.

Professional wrestling research usually explores the phenomenon of kayfabe within the context of the chosen author’s lens, as opposed to the concept of kayfabe being analysed exclusively, with Litherland’s definition sitting within his historiography *Wrestling In Britain* that aims to prove professional wrestling’s complex history with both the sporting and

theatrical fields. Another definition of kayfabe comes from Tyson Smith in his essay on the performance of 'passion work' within the professional wrestling genre. He describes kayfabe as the management of:

“...the frontstage relationship with the audience, which attempts to evince passionate emotions (such as awe, fear, and anger), and the backstage relationship with the fellow partner, which demands skilled coordination, control, trust, and empathy”  
(Smith, 2006, p 162).

Smith notes the duality of labour involved in the conviction of the wrestler, as they attempt to convince the crowd of their reality by cooperating with one another to achieve this goal, in essence, covering the kayfabe experience of the wrestler exclusively. Sharon Mazer, in her 1998 book *Sport and Spectacle* chronicling her multi-year research of professional wrestling at both grass roots and national levels, claims that:

“All participants, including fans, present others with at least a bit of 'kayfabe', a term which is taken from nineteenth-century carnival, medicine show, and sideshow practice and simply refers to a con or deception. Kayfabe can also, less pejoratively, refer to participants' self-promotional, rhetorically inflated, and somewhat truth-obfuscating patter that resembles that of the talkers at the traditional sideshow. A kayfabian, then, is a con artist; most wrestlers are proud to be called kayfabians because it means they're in on the (con) game” (Mazer, 1998, p 24).

Mazer notes not only the spectator's role in the upkeep of the illusion, but also the connection between the vital dramaturgical notion of kayfabe and the genre's carnivalesque beginnings, in turn depicting kayfabe as an alluring machination, collaboratively designed to sell content to the consenting consumer.

The centrepiece of today's typical wrestling contest is the situating of two wrestlers or teams of wrestlers, representing opposite poles on the moral spectrum. The protagonist of the



match is referred to as the 'babyface' or simply the 'face', with the antagonist referred to as the 'heel', and this inherent diversity is the structure in which the dramatic action conveys itself through. Inside the ring, faces are respectful of opponents and referees, and show this by respecting the specific rulings of the type of match being wrestled. Faces are generally receptive to audience interaction, and therefore may perform more acrobatic or aesthetically pleasing moves to develop a positive rapport with the crowd. Outside of the ring, they can be presented as role models for behaviour, or they could represent revolt against oppressive power. Bob Backlund, Hulk Hogan and John Cena all portrayed face characteristics relating to socially productive ideology inside and outside the ring, whereas 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin popularised the 'anti-hero' face, otherwise known as 'tweener', using his proud and volatile personality to torment and humiliate his otherwise unforgiving and cruel boss, 'Mr McMahon'.

Heels, on the other hand, are dismissive to both fans and opponents, taking every opportunity to rile the crowd up by insulting them or using under-handed tactics to gain an unfair advantage, and act equally as disrespectful to faces outside the ring. Heels display behavioural traits that can be read by an audience as socially destructive or can otherwise represent issues within society that the promoter or wrestler would like to shed light on. For instance, Kamala, Umaga and The Great Khali were portrayed as 'monster heels', villains that showcased their wrestling ability with dominance, representing an area foreign and prone to caricature from a westernised audience. Conversely, former WWE champion and vegan activist Daniel Bryan has portrayed his actual beliefs on eco-friendliness and consumerism through the framing of heel behaviour, transforming his truth into fictionalised motivations for villainy, using these legitimate concerns to justify his undeniable antagonism.

Professional wrestling matches then, instead of containing legitimate athletic competition, exist solely to contextualise the conflict within the melodramatic world that wrestling operates in. Stories can revolve around rivalries for championship titles or other aspects of wrestling that circulate around 'sporting' activity, and rarely are these kinds of stories concluded outside of the ring. Conversely, stories have revolved around moral and domestic discrepancies alike, including and not limited to, the right to wear a mask (extended to the right to keep a full head of hair), the safety of a wrestler's mother, and even the custody of a child. Storylines, otherwise known as 'angles' or 'programs', like the embodiment of the wrestlers, represent the ideals and insecurities that help spectators relate to the characters telling that story. Whether based in the sporting aesthetic or melodramatically amplified, storylines are purposely structured over multiple weeks, months, and even years, this being achieved through weekly or otherwise regular television broadcasts that allows for the showcasing of numerous wrestlers and feuds at a time. Televised matches are featured alongside 'promos', defined as interviews with wrestlers for a character or storyline **promotional** effect, or 'vignettes' hyping a wrestler's debut or return to the promotion. These broadcasts act as nationally syndicated advertisements for the semi-regular pay-per-view events that more often than not act as the narrative climax of those feuds' current chapter, however, even though "the actual display of violence is a culmination of past confrontations and a part of an accumulating series of encounters", the episodic nature of the matches is always superseded by the serialization of the melodrama, as "a fight is rarely finished at the bell. One thing always leads to another. As one match ends, the stage is invariably set for a return encounter" (Mazer, 1998, p 19).

Whilst the stories found in professional wrestling have been compared to a more contemporary form of morality play, "comparisons to melodrama are easier understood and much more convincing" since modern professional wrestling "combines the codes and conventions of sport and fuses them to the personal, social, and moral conflicts that

characterized nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama” (Litherland, 2018, p 118). Henry Jenkins specifically describes professional wrestling as a ‘masculine melodrama’, a form of theatre that “foregrounds aspects of masculine mythology which have a particular significance for its predominantly working-class male audience – the experience of vulnerability, the possibilities of male trust and intimacy, and the populist myth of the national community” (Jenkins, 2005, p 39), an indication that professional wrestling exists as a cultural space that actively encourages the performance and subsequent interrogation of the many possibilities of masculinity and the areas of society it dominates.

The combination of moral standing, behaviour and iconography performed inside and outside of the ring creates the wrestler’s ‘gimmick’ – on surface level, the athlete’s characterisation, but semantically, a dramaturgical vessel of hyperbole and provocation. Defined by Merriam-Webster as “a mechanical device for secretly and dishonestly controlling gambling apparatus” (Merriam-webster.com, n.d.), it is rather fitting that a form of theatre masquerading as sport uses such a term to describe one of its vital components; ‘gimmick’ matches involving ‘gimmicked’ weapons are held in attempts to heighten the dramatic tension, melodramatically conveying aspects of the gimmicked behaviour of the wrestlers. It is the many gimmicks of professional wrestling that act as the dramaturgical fibres of kayfabe. Able to be moulded and manipulated in seemingly endless ways, the monetary semiotics that gimmicking conveys offer a further understanding of the presence of kayfabe within professional wrestling, as a gimmicked bandit or arcade machine is designed as such for the maximising of profit from the customer. A clear link can be made from this capitalist ideal to the economic spirit of the professional wrestling industry, as Sharon Mazer explains:

“From the beginnings of modern American wrestling, the wrestler had to make a show and be a showman in order to make an income and be successful. As a result of their day-to-day dependence on spectator interest and response, professional wrestlers were, and remain, showbiz entrepreneurs, hustlers who fought each other

for spectator and promoter support as much as for victory in the ring” (Mazer, 1998, p 24).

This may prove that the grandiose spectacle that is professional wrestling, seemingly devoid of any underlying fiscal agenda in its ‘obvious’ obscenity, continues to rely on the sustainability and ‘evidence’ of its own reality through the evolution of the ballyhoo originally employed to distance itself from the sport it was based on; a change universally agreed upon by the sport’s major capital out of an insecurity surrounding the fiscal health of the industry remaining a legitimate form of competition, as we will explore later on.

To help sustain the growing illusion of wrestling’s legitimacy, ergo, maximising profit margins, Scott Beekman explains that “to maintain a veil of secrecy concerning their moneymaking machinations, carnival workers invented a secret slang language, a variant of pig Latin”, and how “wrestlers adopted this terminology and the notion of keeping the business secret”, with the term kayfabe being a bastardised version of the phrase ‘be fake’ (Beekman, 2006, p 40). George Kerrick notes that “the attitude expressed by the jargon of professional wrestling clearly indicates that it is a business, not a sport” (Kerrick, 1980, p 142), further stating of the distance imposed by this linguistic ethos that “The language seems to dehumanize the action, to emphasize the ritual, the mechanical, rather than the emotional and personal” (ibid, p 145). Historically, wrestling fans have been referred to as ‘marks’: “a wrestling fan not clued in to the sham of the enterprise” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 15), taking the term from the convention of marking customers that have not yet sunk their money into the many stalls on the carnival midway (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016). At a time when wrestling’s reputation was at rock bottom, especially considering boxing and wrestling’s prosperous relationship with each other’s turbulence (Shoemaker, 2015, p 22), it is of no surprise that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century promoters based in the carnival circuit made every attempt to hide the inner workings of the ‘sport’, surely motivated by the fear behind

another downturn in revenue should spectator distrust become further compromised by knowledge of the ongoing con.

These attitudes have undoubtedly continued into contemporary professional wrestling. Al Snow, former WWE wrestler, states of kayfabe during his training seminars that the adherence to it “[is] a way to show respect to the audience and respect to your own business”, commenting on the insulting nature of reminding spectators of wrestling’s predetermined nature: “...am I gonna spend my money and buy into it and believe in it and you then just drive up and flaunt it in my face? That I just got taken?” (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016). Here, Snow denotes an element of respect, using the example of feuding wrestlers carpooling to an arena together to explain the importance of sustaining the illusion of conflict - much like how opposing boxers or MMA fighters would not share the same training camps or transport, professional wrestlers are historically expected not to contradict the presented narrative of their current storyline or feud through their activity outside of the wrestling event. Despite this seemingly exploitative behaviour, Snow makes sure to emphasise to his students that the term ‘mark’ “doesn’t mean fans, doesn’t mean you’re stupid, doesn’t mean you’re gullible, it’s not an insult, it is a term, that’s it” (ibid, 2016), indicating a moral change in the underlying motivations for the fabrication.

Not just housing merely the wrestlers as competent performers, a whole cast of people are required to sustain the gimmicks of this ‘legitimate’ sporting event. Much like in other combat sports such as amateur wrestling and mixed martial arts, there exists persons of an officiating and overseeing capacity, present not only to enforce the fictional rules of the game but to help simulate the concept of the sporting contest. Whether it be the referee, or the timekeeper, or the ringside doctors, these cast members work in coalition with the wrestlers to develop the wrestling impression. Considering the commonality of the referee being

distracted by outside interference, costing the protagonist a hard fought victory, this performed incompetence exists only to further the dramatic action: “the referee becomes another actor in the play of good and evil, a role that he generally enacts as deliberately as do the other participants, arguing with wrestlers and spectators alike as they challenge his authority” (Mazer, 1998, p 33). Litherland explains the relationship between the metaphor of authoritarian incompetence within professional wrestling and the historically predominant working-class audiences of sport:

“Referees generally failed to discipline villainous wrestlers, and repeatedly missed fouls. This was part of the narrative structure... [the idea that] referees seem to have taken the brunt of abuse in both [football and wrestling] is telling: the opportunity granted to disenfranchised members of society to laugh at, mock, and shout insults at an authority figure without recourse must have been, and remains, part of the appeal of some organised spectator sports” (Litherland, 2018, p 96).

Our understanding of the sporting contest is met by the simple presence of the officiating capacity, yet the performance of said individuals meets our expectation of “the familiar patterning of virtue and vice, of loss and recovery, of victory justly or unjustly snatched from the jaws of defeat, of revenge for previous atrocities” (Mazer, 1998, p 28).

The insistence on its own legitimacy during performance in face of common consensus understanding that the bouts are rigged proves that the retention of kayfabe remains central to the spectacle even today, and successful companies like WWE benefit from their monopoly of the professional wrestling industry by creating self-owned media publications to help cultivate the kayfabe internally:

“In such media, the wrestler’s fictional character is reported like a non-fictional sporting celebrity and fictional narratives are perpetuated and reported as facts. As

such, promoters and professional wrestlers seek to be viewed as sporting celebrities, but lacking the clear separation of an actor playing a part” (Litherland, 2014, p 531).

The advent of social media within the past decade has further moulded professional wrestling as it allows the wrestler more agency over their presentation of their persona by using social media as a performative outlet, presenting a simulation of personal and competitive conflict in a public place, as explained by Litherland in his analysis of WWE’s use of Twitter:

“As well as encouraging audiences to live tweet during its shows, professional wrestling Twitter timelines often serve as a continuation of the fictional world presented on television screens. Wrestlers tweet in-character and promote ongoing narratives, rivalries and forthcoming matches. The presentation of online kayfabe collapses the notion of a contained diegesis, and Twitter becomes an extension of the fictional and performed world” (ibid, p 532).

Discussion of sporting celebrity becomes especially prevalent in the understanding of kayfabe when examining the role that promoters play in the creation and subsequent presentation of their kayfabe, therefore, the management of celebrity hierarchy. The immediate aftermath of the move towards dramatization in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped promoters and their team of ‘bookers’ control the unpredictable nature of the ‘sport’, and therefore it’s inherent star system. Promoters hold the keys to the kingdom in the sense that they are the ones at the top of the capital food chain, with the power to sustain or censor success by delegating the roles in which wrestlers and other cast members are to feature in their promotion. Promoters decide who acts as the face of the company, touring with the top title (usually touted as one of many ‘world’ titles), and who acts as the foils to make their face of the company look good. Certain wrestlers that act as foils can sometimes referred to as ‘jobbers’: wrestlers that are hired for the sole purpose of doing the ‘job’ for another performer

with more upside or potential. However, perennial jobbers can make just as much money as some mid-card to upper level performers, reinforcing the idea that a world championship, whilst holding undeniable value in the industry, still serves as a gimmick as it is not a true indication of success within the promotion. Real-life authority figures like current CEO of WWE, Vince McMahon, and former head of WWE talent and personnel, John Laurinaitis, can also appear as on air talent, usually in a villainous role, turning their real life capital into a gimmick in itself (and therefore part of the overall gimmicking), providing themselves as a metaphor for the struggle for capital that both wrestlers and the working class find when faced with the obstacle course that is the workplace hierarchy. Promoters control the tools that decide the inner logic of the kayfabe presented to their audience, and more importantly, have the power to reframe these logics as they please.

Benjamin Litherland claims that “professional wrestling can be read as melodramatic not because it serves as an extension of theatrical genres, but because wrestlers are versions of celebrity, and all celebrity culture is an expression of a broader melodramatic mode” (Litherland, 2018, p 115), stating further on the presence of melodrama in sport that “technological improvements in the 1970s... allowed sporting contests to construct narratives and focus on stories and sporting celebrities” (ibid, p 152). Of the relationship between kayfabe in professional wrestling and celebrity culture in general, Litherland argues that:

“According to Joshua Gamson, one of the central attractions of celebrity culture is the way that audiences play with the celebrity image, including trying to decipher what public presentation is ‘true’ and what is ‘performance’. Gamson refers to this playfulness as a game, but the rules of the games are very much rooted in the field or fields in which the celebrity exists. Professional wrestling therefore offered a condensed pleasure of celebrity culture, and kayfabe explained the relationship to these games” (ibid, p 139).



Celebrity in the sense of being known and evoking a reaction is the pipedream of many a wrestler as maximising one's celebrity value ensures that the wrestler gets 'over'. Note the difference in the possessive form of 'overness' compared to the going 'over' found in being booked to win in the scripted fight. **Going** over another wrestler is just one technique out of many in helping a wrestler **get** over with the crowd. We can now argue that these calculated world-building efforts, involving the embellishment of conflict, the personas involved, and setting that surrounds it, helps promoters, bookers and other backstage employees manage a simulated hierarchy of sporting celebrity for the wrestlers, the world's most valuable inhabitants; this can be seen through the wrestler's predetermined wins and losses, and their platitudes and pitfalls in storyline being displayed to a national audience on a weekly basis. This routine exposure helps monetise the wrestler's dramaturgical labour through merchandise, television broadcast contracts and live event ticket sales revenue, providing them with a self-branded safety net should their current contract expire or be terminated.

Despite the lengths in which wrestlers and promoters alike have reached to protect the perception of professional wrestling, it could be suggested that Vince McMahon's decision to officially disclose his product as 'sports entertainment' in the late 1980's, whilst achieving its main goal of removing himself "from the auspices of the Athletic Control Board while simultaneously being able to avoid paying the taxes of televised sports" (Litherland, 2018, p 101), bestowed upon performers and spectators alike a new found theatrical freedom, free from the shackles of overt disguise. What was once thought as industry suicide became, at least in McMahon's eyes, a fiscal necessity, and it is of common belief that this act marked the end of kayfabe. Edward Dean, researching a similar development in the mentalist/mindreading industry, argues however that:

"MacMahon's decision to lift the veil was widely derided within the professional wrestling community but it did not destroy the industry. On the contrary, the deregulation allowed for previously unprecedented promotions, events, and financial

success. And thus, the unspoken agreement between fans and wrestlers was an evolution of kayfabe; from, what I would describe as a **closed** kayfabe to an **open** kayfabe” (Dean, 2018, p 19).

The notion of a contained fictional world would seem impossible in such a technologically exposed climate; self-owned media publications and social media accounts however perfectly compliment the open kayfabe in their accessibility, and presenting a narrative in today’s technologically advanced climate doesn’t necessarily have to rely on the broadcasting of the in ring action alone. Regardless, the open kayfabe has allowed the spectator more access to the industry, and with that, a certain amount of power.

Dean states of professional wrestling’s appeal that “it is the open nature of modern kayfabe which makes contemporary professional wrestling such a fascinating form of performance.” (Dean, 2018, p 19). Whilst Dean’s distinction of this evolution is on the money – wrestling has become more profitable since promoters introduced transparency to their business model, the idea that spectators at one point were not aware of wrestling’s scripted nature is widely dismissed by researchers. Despite the industry’s efforts to distance itself from their customer base, wrestling fans have always sought to learn more about the inner workings of the industry, priding themselves on the vast amount of knowledge they collate through their fandom:

“As with any microcosmic world, a wrestling language developed over the years to mark the insiders from the outsiders. What separates wrestling lingo from some other similar industry dialects is how the insider terms have become widespread terms of art with the emergence of the internet era” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 15),

The rise of the internet and the evolution of the industry in accordance, meant that paying customers - ‘marks’ - developed a further understanding of the “intimate backstage

knowledge of the wrestling world” (ibid, p 15), helping coin the term ‘smark’, or smart mark. Mazer even goes as far to claim that “what is important and empowering to wrestling fans... is their hard-won knowledge of the game, their facility with its vocabulary and dramaturgy, and their position in the exchange” (Mazer, 1998, p 160). Celebrity culture, most notably in gossip-based journalism, can be seen in a similar way in its insistence on the ‘authenticity’ of the human behind the presented celebrity persona by virtue of such reports as ‘fact’, as Litherland states:

“Regardless of the field, celebrity reporting almost always focused on the possibility of capturing that ‘real’ performer in their day-to-day lives, and celebrities can be defined as being ‘the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role... to investigating the details of their private lives” (Litherland, 2018, p 137).

Celebrity reporting itself offers a mythology of authenticity in the pursuit of capturing the celebrity in a role transcendent of their public role, the mythology directly contributing to the eventual monetisation of the celebrity’s labour. Likewise, with social media’s ability to connect the celebrity to the consumer, that sense of authenticity is purported as part of the communication model, and is often used as a platform for celebrities from all walks of life to essentially write their own narratives with regards to the products they sell, their politics, and even in response to gossip columns pontificating on said celebrities private life.

Dissemination of celebrity in professional wrestling works in a similar, symbiotic way, yet its consumers are by now exceedingly aware of the inauthenticity of the form, and such an evolution of the fan’s role in the maintenance of professional wrestling ‘lore’ despite its inauthenticity calls into question the potential futility of previous understandings of kayfabe, as Litherland aptly concludes on the fragility of the ‘closed’ kayfabe:

“Through Vince McMahon’s testimony in 1989 created a candidness in talking about the form and structure of professional wrestling’s performances, it is hard to sustain the idea that before then kayfabe was ‘alive’ in the sense audiences fully believed the

performances as it was presented to them. How could they? From the moment wrestling became a sporting entertainment, the press regularly ran reports about wrestling's nature. Whether in explanations for why they did not feature reports in the sporting pages, pulp magazines about con tricks, descriptions of wrestlers joining theatrical trade unions, or 'exclusive' exposures from disgruntled former referees, wrestling being 'fake' was repeated throughout the twentieth century, and audiences would have seen this." (Litherland, 2018, p 104).

## Outline of sections

Kayfabe then, is clearly a divisive concept in both the industry and its representative academic texts. What is established is how the concept of kayfabe revolves around the premeditation of combat, the convincing performance of consequence, and the extension of performance into the reality of the spectator. Comprehensive historical analysis of the presentation and aesthetics of kayfabe now seems like the best option if we plan to transcribe any form of evolution from one point to another. Throughout this essay, we will be referring to the work of Erving Goffman and his understanding on how we experience life as a series of interactions with vastly different meanings and intentions dependent on the context, or 'frame' surrounding them, taken from the aptly named *Frame Analysis*, originally written in 1974.

In an essay depicting reference to nuclear tension through Goffman's frameworks, Michael Hill states in the attempt to fully realise *Frame Analysis's* potential as a "knowledge-producing system" that we must first comprehend the vast "operational" applicability of Goffman's literature before interrogating "the empirical world to discover the degree to which Goffman's ideas illuminate the nature of our everyday experiences" (Hill, 2014, p 6). To achieve this, we must first introduce the cornerstone of Goffman's work in *Frame Analysis*, the key: a device employed to transform an action from one strip of meaning to another. Using the analogy of animal play, specifically otters, Goffman states:

"...on some signal or other, the otters would begin playfully to stalk, chase, and attack each other, and on some other signal would stop the play. An obvious point about this play behaviour is that the actions of the animals are not ones that are, as it

were, meaningful in themselves; the framework of these actions does not make meaningless events meaningful, there being a contrast here to primary understandings, which do. Rather, this play activity is closely patterned after something that already has a meaning in its own terms – in this case fighting, a well-known type of guided doing. Real fighting here serves as a model, a detailed pattern to follow, a foundation for form. Just as obviously, the pattern for fighting is not followed fully, but rather is systematically altered in certain respects. Bitinglike behaviour occurs, but no one is seriously bitten. In brief, there is a transcription or transposition – a *transformation* in the geometrical, not the Chomskyan sense – of a strip of fighting behaviour into a strip of play” (Goffman, 1986, p 40).

Keying then, is the transposition of behaviours and concepts understood one way within a ‘primary framework’ (defined simply as “the first concept that is needed” in terms of chronologically transcribing a wider context) into something else altogether (ibid, p 25). Behaviour is managed ‘in’ key by the social agents involved in the experience in reference to the general collective understanding of the situation and the many possibilities that exist within that, something Goffman explores in depth in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* through his understanding of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1990, p 28). Concepts are understood ‘in’ key with surrounding areas of reference that dictate the potency of the sign and social relevance, as evidenced by an interrogation of ‘basketball’ in the key of ‘law’, highlighting the significance of playing the game in a “legalistic way, players [constituting] the game as ‘real’ and ‘serious’ rather than ‘mere play’” (DeLand, 2013, p 653). Furthermore, whilst something might look similar or even identical in its presentation, it is the framing in which it takes place that gives it meaning, so “given the possibility of a frame that incorporates rekeyings, it becomes convenient to think of each transformation as adding a *layer or lamination* to an activity” (Goffman, 1986, p 82).

Kayfabe, in its most vague sense, is best conceptualised as a frame in which activity is 'keyed' into, or otherwise transformed for the purpose of fabricating its true intent. The many fabrications and gimmicks present in the production of professional wrestling make use of the 'contest', 'make-believe' and 'technical redoing' keys, resulting in a conceptually fluid performance of a sport that is putatively legitimate, yet fixed in its dramaturgy, but most importantly immersive in its uncanny ability to emulate the way we conceptualise the stories of our own lives. Professional wrestlers enact the role of professional wrestler through both the physical doing of choreographed combat and the equally deliberate performance of a range of human emotions and experiences, their collective efforts residing in a self-sustaining simulation of sporting celebrity, so the specificity of what is 'going on' within the general frame of kayfabe depends entirely on the semantic origins of the activity we intend to interrogate – as Goffman explains dutifully, “a strip of activity is merely a starting point; all sorts of perspectives and uses can be brought to it” (Goffman, 1986, p 64).

Considering this, Section 2 will start to contextualise when professional wrestling's embellishments first came to fruition as I introduce the concepts of combat, the worked match and the 'work/shoot' dichotomy, expanding further on the influence of the contest, make-believe and technical redoing keys on the construction of the original fabrication, the worked match, and its gradual implementation into the narratives of kayfabe. Section 3 will explore the emergence of broadcasting as both a keying device and a promotional tool, and the lengths in which the kayfabe of the industry was both perpetuated and protected by its players. As professional wrestling lunges into the mainstream, the growing presence of reality within the 'sport' will be examined, the industry radicalising typically understood behaviours to combat this. Section 4 introduces postmodern professional wrestling through the lens of academic context, supported by Erving Goffman's work on the 'theatrical frame' in *Frame Analysis* and 'impression management' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. By the end of the thesis, we should have a better understanding of kayfabe as a fixed

lamination in which fluid activity passes in and out of, and what it means to act 'in' and 'out' of kayfabe.

Whilst my thesis will reference the developments of wrestling in both the USA and other areas of the world, my main point of reference will be within the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formerly WWF) promotion. Since the turn of the millennium, the wrestling market has been largely monopolised by WWE, existing as a publicly traded company that amassed a revenue of \$903.2 million in the 2018 financial year. WWE is undoubtedly the most recognisable wrestling brand worldwide, owning the assets and lineage of some of their main historical competitors (including but not limited to World Championship Wrestling aka WCW, and Extreme Championship Wrestling aka ECW), their business practices and general creative direction serving as a blueprint for successfully marketing a professional wrestling company. Vince McMahon, the CEO and majority shareholder of WWE, has previously experimented with bodybuilding and American football, alongside funding WWE Studios, a film production company that features both well-known actors/actresses and WWE wrestlers in their films and acting as a distribution company for other studios. This intermedia fluidity is echoed on their corporate website: "WWE, a publicly traded company (NYSE: WWE), is an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment" (WWE, 2019). It must be considered that since professional wrestling thematically interacts with its regional localities, the developments of professional wrestling are scattered divisively when examining the culture it resides in. What remains apparent though is how the WWE model of operating exists as the status quo, and its success and undeniable influence on the wider popular culture is worthy of further analysis.



## **2.1 Introduction to pugilism**

Understanding the full context of professional wrestling's change from legitimate to fixed is much more complex than this opening statement would let us presume – David Shoemaker claims that professional wrestling “was once a purer sport, sure – a sport full of fixed matches and exploitative put-ons. But just as much as it was a sport, it was a sideshow – a carnny act that eventually made its way to Broadway” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 29). In section 2, we will introduce our discussion of kayfabe by noting the humble beginnings of professional wrestling as a pugilistic pastime, and its slow transition towards a completely simulated exhibition of classic grappling styles. I will use pugilism as an umbrella term for the different styles of grappling that modern professional wrestling borrows its physical nature from, including but not limited to collar-and-elbow, Greco-Roman, Lancashire, Catch-as-Catch-Can, and ‘All-in’, noting the difference in ‘framing limits’ as a grapple heavy contest as opposed to boxing, technically a pugilistic pastime yet focused entirely on striking.

Explored throughout will be the ways in which the contest, make-believe and technical redoing (namely ‘exhibition’ and ‘documentary’) keys directed the diminishing purity of the sport. Goffman states of the transformative nature of certain sporting or otherwise competitive activity that borrow from a communally understood action, such as boxing (combat/sparring) or horse racing (running/fleeing), that the keying devices that provide such a transformation exist within the rulings of said activities, a concept Goffman refers to as “framing limits... signs of the decline of toleration for cruelty and performer risk” (Goffman, 1986, p 56). In laymans terms, the framing limits of the ‘contest key’ are the societal boundaries and expectations in which staging a legitimate contest of something is best constructed in – winning and losing parties, enforcement of rules, acknowledgement of the historical lineage of the activity, etc.

However, such limits exist for all types of performance, including the ones that professional wrestling borrow its distinctive melodramatic charm from – Goffman himself states that “the issue of framing limits can be illustrated especially well by reference to dramatic scriptings” (ibid, p 53), with the main points of contention revolving around the social decency or appropriateness of the performance at hand, “the limits concerning what can be permissibly transcribed from actual events to scriptings thereof” (ibid, p 56). Dramatic scriptings are a subheading under the ‘make-believe’ key, in which a strip of activity is transposed into something based on that action, but understood to be “an avowed, ostensible imitation or running through of less transformed activity” (ibid, p 48), so it is to be expected that the melodramatic or parodic elements of professional wrestling are keyed in this way.

Finally, the ‘technical redoing’ key directs a strip of activity:

“...for utilitarian purposes openly different from those of the original performance, the understanding being that the original outcome of the activity will not occur” (Goffman, 1986, p 59).

Insofar as professional wrestling’s utility within the economic cycle of activity, scenarios include the broadcasting of matches on television or pay-per-view, the creation of wrestling schools (and the activity in seminars that take place within them), the labelling of bouts as ‘exhibitions’ for legal benefit, and the distribution of news and gossip within the industry by professional wrestling journalists. The latter, ‘documentary’ key is especially relevant in its “purpose of establishing as fact” (ibid, p 68), considering how integral the construction of and then adherence to ‘reality’ is throughout our exploration the fabrication of the kayfabe lamination.

Considering this, to avoid semantic pitfalls during our exploration of professional wrestling, we must interrogate the primary framework the simulation is based on first. In professional wrestling's case, since we are referring to a performance of sport, we must address the content of the sporting activity – this happens to be combat. Insofar as combat's definition as a guided doing, an action at the “will, aim and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being” (Goffman, 1986, p 22), we have transcribed the first point of reference for “a law of understanding, an approach, a perspective” (ibid, p 21), ‘kayfabe’ as a behaviour oriented framework being best understood as the former.

Whilst the evolved form of professional wrestling no doubt exists within a niche sector of the entertainment and sporting industries, its original, purely combative form has permeated culture worldwide, as Scott Beekman explains in *Ringside*:

“Accounts of grappling are found in almost all ancient civilizations around the globe. The function of wrestling, however, varied widely, dependent on the culture examined. For some peoples, wrestling represented an autotelic means of celebrating the human form; for others, it was a functional activity for military or religious purposes” (Beekman, 2006, p 2).

In ancient Greece, wrestling was held in the same prominent regard as track and field contests within the early accounts of Olympic events:

“While it was at the great athletic festivals, the Olympics being the most celebrated, that Greek wrestlers gained the most renown, grappling arts were practiced throughout the Hellenic world, and boys were expected to learn the rudiments of the sport even if they harboured no desire to compete in the festivals” (ibid, p 3).

In the UK and America, wrestling too emerged from festival and carnival culture. Benjamin Litherland argues:

“Festival culture is the best-documented and most rigid form of archival evidence of popular culture... [existing as] a disruption from the hard-working lives of the rural poor and an event that brought most, if not all, the local community together to laugh and play... divorced from the harsh lived experiences of agricultural labour” (Litherland, 2018, p 24).

Conversely, wrestling was then employed by the upper class as a fitness regime in preparation for battle and as the years passed, even in spite of English Puritan opposition, we see the beginnings of a nationwide sporting culture emerge as “wealthy patrons supported and promoted working class athletes, and professionalism and wagering flourished by the early 18th century” (Beekman, 2006, p 5). In America, the sport (like many others) was suppressed by Puritan settlers in New England in the 17th century:

“Their animosity reflected concerns about the gambling, arguments, and inflamed passions that often accompanied sports and games... only after waves of Irish immigrants and changing attitudes concerning physical activity served as counters to this tradition did a true sporting culture take hold in New England” (ibid, p 6).

Beekman here is referring to the influx of Irish settlers in the district of Vermont in the mid-19th century, as they brought over the regional style of collar-and-elbow and in effect helped to normalise physical activity from the shadow of what Puritans called ‘idle amusements’. After this, organised combat slowly started becoming a widely accepted part of the worldwide sporting lexicon, forming the framing limits of the contest key in which pugilism would operate in.

The historical importance of sporting celebrity within professional wrestling dates back to the creation of the contest key. With the emergence of burgeoning sporting cultures comes a movement to monetise such activity, as Beekman explains of the unforeseen repercussions of the industrial revolution:

“The mass production of consumer goods drove many craft guilds out of the market, introduced regimented work schedules, and reduced wages for manual laborers to near poverty levels. This declining status for industrial workers hampered their ability to focus on sports, but also created a reservoir of young men willing, if not required, to attempt a career in professional sports” (Beekman, 2006, p 15).

The burgeoning sporting boom encouraged journals and newspapers to increase their readership by reporting on sporting activity, in turn creating an environment for pugilists to thrive outside the carnival and tavern settings that the initial sporting culture resided:

“...it also created an environment in which wrestlers and other sports figures developed name recognition in areas they had never personally appeared. This building of national reputations helped wrestlers engage in profitable tours beyond their home regions and also established the validity of claimants to championship titles” (ibid, p 16).

In various newspaper outlets, boxers (closely followed by wrestlers) would issue public challenges in an effort to build their own brand on both a local and a national scale, “a typical post resembled Peter McCoy’s 1880 challenge to John T. Grady to wrestle for \$100 a side ‘at any place the latter names’” (ibid, p 16), a promotional tactic that can be traced back to English pugilism, as Litherland reports:

“magazines and newspapers helped to disseminate the commercial sporting culture to growing national audiences: rules were written down and distributed, and histories, results and forthcoming events were recorded” (Litherland, 2018, p 126).

Here, we see both the ‘contest’ key in effect through the development of sports as a socially viable competitive activity, and its subsequent historical preservation and perpetuation through advertisement in the press existing within the ‘documentary’ key. At a time before the stranglehold promoters had on individual wrestler’s marketability and performance, the emergence of a sporting star system created by the combatants themselves helped combat

sports alike thrive and “in doing so, this early form of the press turned fighters into celebrities, and as celebrities they could stand in for wider identities” (ibid, p 126).

Evidence that suggests success as a pugilist or combatant can act as a gateway into other areas of entertainment predates professional wrestling’s climb to the top of the multimedia ladder, as researchers recognise that prize fighters from the 1700’s (Griffiths, 2015, p 39) onwards engaged in other areas of entertainment, namely music hall, vaudeville and circus, often providing an element of the sport under the framing of *sparring* or *exhibition*.

Exhibitions, explicitly referred to under the ‘technical redoing’ key with emphasis on the event as “out of its usual context in order to allow someone who is not the performer to obtain a close picture of the doing of the activity” (Goffman, 1986, p 66), can be seen as a make-believe keying of the contest key insofar as its performance of organised combat.

Pugilists would monetise their physical labour through low-risk re-enactments of the grappling skills they were primarily known for, as Litherland surmises:

“the allure of the stage was powerful: it offered relative safety from injury, its money was more consistent, and theatrical tours aided the distribution of a wrestler’s celebrity” (Litherland, 2018, p 55).

Noting Daniel Mendoza as one of the most recognisable names from this period, Litherland explains that “theatrical exhibitions offered the solution for prize-fighters to gain money from their skills”, with scufflers like Mendoza earning “£50-£100 a week” (ibid, p 30). With exhibitions featuring gloved combatants, time limits and even choreography, most (if not all) prospects of danger or death were removed, prolonging the careers of many a fighter.

Another pugilist, William Muldoon, “toured the country as part of a travelling athletic group” (Beekman, 2006, p 25) and was able to do so due to his affinity with the recent Muscular Christianity movement making the rounds of America. John Griffiths states:

“The popularity of wrestling as a transnational phenomenon in the modern era was initially witnessed between 1870 and 1914, and is partially explained by reference to its association with both an increasing cultural nationalism and the cult of physical fitness which burgeoned in the closing decades of the nineteenth century” (Griffiths, 2015, p 40).

Muscular Christianity, an ideology of European origins consisting of values relating to competition, physical perfection and ethical behaviour, provided a nationally accepted framework of behaviours to abide under, the teetotal and gentleman-like Muldoon standing as its poster-boy, and becoming one of the biggest fiscal draws of the pre-1900s – this is an early example of social values being keyed into the ‘gimmick’ of the combatant.

## **2.2 The original fabrication – the ‘worked’ match**

We can now see the primary framework of combat being manipulated in various ways during this early form of professional wrestling through the keys listed, providing the foundations for the development of the worked match as the industry’s original fabrication. Shoemaker states of pugilism on the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

“This brand of ‘professional wrestling’, as it came to be known, was more or less *real*, although of course the outcomes of bouts were sometimes fixed – which is to say that wrestling was real in those early days exactly to the extent that boxing was real” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 10).

The insinuation here is that combat sports alike suffered the same problem when it came to enforcing the legitimacy and purity of the event at hand. What we will explore here is exactly how and why pugilism (hereby referred to as ‘professional wrestling’ or ‘wrestling’) transformed into an entirely fabricated imitation of itself adjacent to other sports who did not suffer the same fate, through analysis of the vital component in the creation of a professional wrestling narrative, the worked match.

Regarding the prominent Greco-Roman champion William Muldoon introducing time limits to his touring bouts, Beekman claims:

“from this relatively benign alteration, professional wrestling slowly became an exercise in pure entertainment” (Beekman, 2006, p 39).

Gimmicks, at least in the iconographical sense, even existed within the limited theatrical inventory of wrestling’s more ostensibly legitimate days:



“From the ‘sultan’s favourites’ who stormed these shores as the ‘Terrible Turks’ of the late nineteenth century to the proliferation of Masked Marvels in the wake of Mort Henderson’s initial turn as that hooded character in the mid-1910s, gimmicks helped sell wrestling even during the catch era” (ibid, p 74).

The emerging influence that the theatrical field and carnival culture had on wrestling at this time meant that business operated two-fold; wrestlers and their respective management teams would schedule legitimate contests months in advance, meanwhile touring the country/continent either through theatrical tours (Litherland, 2018, p 32) or in ‘worked’ matches (Beekman, 2006, p 39) in an effort to promote their upcoming ‘shoot’ fight, therefore, sporting celebrity:

“To generate interest in the [title] matches, carnival operators often employed two wrestlers to work together. The ‘inside’ man, the carnival champion, met all comers; the ‘outside’ man, or ‘stick’, pretended to be a normal audience member. The stick would volunteer to accept the at[hletic] show champion’s challenge, and the two then engaged in a spirited bout in which the outside man either emerged victorious or lasted the time limit, making the at show wrestlers learn both the catch style and how to engage in believable ‘works’. These skills could then be transferred to ostensibly legitimate professional wrestling matches outside of the carnival circuit. The experience provided by working the at shows proved so effective that these carnival attractions served as training grounds for professional wrestlers in the 1950’s” (ibid, p 40).

When considering the intent of the conventions listed, one could talk of what Goffman calls ‘fabrication’ – whilst a keying assumes all of the frame’s participants, both players and observers, are aware of the transformation of the strip of activity at hand, a fabrication dictates that:

“...a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on” (Goffman, 1986, p 83).

A fabrication of the contest key, yet still framed as such, the worked match listed here required the wrestler acting as a regular member of the audience to actively collude with the ‘champion’ in the ring to fabricate the contest of legitimate combat, unbeknownst to the ‘marks’ that are watching on, betting money on the victor, ‘contained’ within the fabrication (Goffman, 1986, p 83). The introduction of the worked match at this point of professional wrestling history marks the first step towards a universal code of fabrication for the sport, a code that would eventually form the lamination of kayfabe. In terms of exactly how the fabrication of the worked match is coercively built, wrestlers have historically been trained to ‘call’ worked matches in the ring, as Mazer explains:

“Performances are improvised, constructed moment-to-moment from sequences of moves according to traditional patterns and scenarios that are decided in advance” (Mazer, 1998, p 23).

This notion of coercion from one performer to another is reiterated by Tyson Smith, aptly describing the curation of the worked match’s pacing as a framework of ‘spots’ for performers to follow:

“On the whole, performers establish a general framework with a beginning, a ‘finishing move’ and a few moves in the middle. The framework helps wrestlers know that they need to be in certain positions at given times, but like a jazz performance, there is ample room for improvisation” (Smith, 2008, p 166).

Smith’s analysis of the structuring of a worked match resides in an essay he penned, describing the occupation of professional wrestling as a form of passion work:

“jointly performed emotional labor intended to elicit a passionate response from subjects through an impression of extreme states such as joy, agony, or suffering” (ibid, p 159).

This involves 'selling' the opponent's moves by responding physically in such a way that would logically make sense if the move were indeed real. The deliberate structuring of a match for narrative value, combined with the elaborate characterisation of the wrestlers also help create the impression of passion work, a result only achieved by thorough cooperation and a large amount of trust. Former WWF champion Bret Hart states in the infamous documentary *'Wrestling with Shadows'* that "the art of wrestling is doing it full contact... but not hurting your opponent" (Jay, 1998), proving that the historical development of the worked match has dictated a sense of acceptable and unacceptable activity during performance in regards to the communally understood 'framing limits' as they pertain to performer risk.

It may be fit to envision the story of a wrestling match as a sequential keying of 'strategic fabrications': Goffman states that the contest key allows for:

"the use of misdirection, the use of feints, bluffs, and hidden moves, that these actions depend on the formulation of a design that is kept secret, and that these secrets are purely 'strategic' in the sense that the viability of the misdirection is alone at stake, not the moral character of the misdirector" (Goffman, 1986, p 102)

What is of interest here is how kayfabe transforms the strategic fabrications of organised combat into something in which the 'moral character' of the 'wrestler' is intertwined with the purity of the 'fabrications' they choose to employ depending on their position in kayfabe's moral spectrum. Considering this, the postmodern worked match, presented to showcase a contest of two parties of similar 'ability', follows a consistent pattern: the face starts off hot, allowing room for an audience to portray enthusiasm and appreciation for the protagonist of the story, before being 'cut off' by the heel, building a sense of 'heat' (otherwise understood as anticipation) for the face to make the comeback, the intention being that the anticipation built transforms the audience's reaction to the dramatic action from an elementary level of engagement to something more rapturous, otherwise known as a 'pop'.

Al Snow, former WWE wrestler and current wrestling trainer describes 'heat' as:

“a want, a need, a desire, that you build within the audience... a babyface figures out what the audience wants, tries to give it to them, heel takes it away, by playing the game of keep-away, you can build heat” (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016).

This idea is reaffirmed by the research Tyson Smith presents in his journal article by disclosing the role of the villain in directing the dramatic action within the ring:

“The heel normally calls the match, the pacing of the match. But it's up to the babyface to know when to fire up and get the people into it” (Smith, 2018, p 167).

After this gradual and calculated building of tension, matches are usually won by pinfall or submission with a wrestler's finishing move or 'finisher', resulting in a narrative crescendo to the dramatic action during the 'finish', and the winning wrestler is referred to as going, or having gone, 'over'. A deep understanding of the correct pacing for matches of different lengths, combined with convincing characterisation and impeccable communication skills, may be what fans and critics refer to as maintaining great 'ring psychology', and the skilled application of the passion work involved in this supports the hypothesis that the worked match “contained everything that made an exciting sporting contest and attempted to remove the unknown variables that competitive sporting competitions suffered” (Litherland, 2018, p 93).

The emergence of the worked match itself was undoubtedly a symptom of an absent overseeing governing body, something the industry lacks even today; one would think an omnipotent force would impose before long the “suppressive legal action, criminal or civil, of the kind brought against certain forms of confidence game, false advertising, mislabeling, and cheating at cards” (Goffman, 1986, p 104). Benjamin Litherland states:

“Key to understanding professional wrestling’s development as a sporting entertainment is its lack of obvious and clearly defined sporting organisation... [professional wrestling] was bereft such an institution, and without such a group, the sport could neither discipline wrestlers or outside forces who sought to embrace entertainment outright, but nor did they have a group who could tweak and enforce rules that might have made legitimate contests more entertaining” (Litherland, p 63, 2018).

Entertainment, or lack of it, seemed to be the main complaint towards professional wrestling, with Shoemaker reporting that “those early championship matches were frequently multihour slogs wherein the combatants rarely stood up off the mat or even moved enough for an audience member past the eighth row to notice” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 10). Litherland echoes this, as he explains the teething problems that the sporting culture encountered when initially perceived as an entertainment medium:

“If most popular spectator sports offered the possibility of entertaining moments, there was still a tendency for sport not to deliver on these fronts. The professional wrestling contests of the early twentieth century had proven this: in big fights, there remained a predisposition for long tedious matches that could last for hours or matches that lasted minutes, with audiences feeling short-changed on both counts” (Litherland, 2018, p 93).

Arguably the most infamous example of such instability during this time belongs to German born, Iowa raised Frank Gotch and Estonia based George Hackenschmidt. Wrestling catch-as-catch-can in its infancy: a “mutt form of organized grappling that incorporated aspects of Greco-Roman wrestling, Irish collar-and-elbow, Indian styles, and the famously violent brand of English fighting called Lancashire wrestling” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 9), their first meeting under this framing limit at Chicago’s Dexter Park in 1908 was conceded by Hackenschmidt

in an approximately 90-120 minute first fall and a forfeited second fall. their second meeting in Comiskey Park three years later attended by 30,000 people, allegedly “the biggest crowd any athletic event had ever attracted in America” (ibid, p 13). Open and shut 20 minutes after the opening bell, it was another decisive win for Gotch against the reportedly injured Hackenschmidt, but this time at the behest of a country that ironically felt conned into attending a fake prize-fight. With its reputation shattered and the first World War around the corner, wrestling ceased to operate as efficiently as it had decades before:

“After the Gotch-Hackenschmidt debacle, the sport passed out of vogue – and moreover, into laughingstock territory. If the matches were exciting, they seemed fixed (even when they weren’t), and if they were boring, well, they were interminable” (Shoemaker, 2015 p 14).

Beekman states further of the disarray:

“With no wrestler able to generate the excitement of Frank Gotch and the attendance figures dwindling, professional wrestling faced a dire circumstance. To survive as an economically viable operation, the sport fundamentally altered. No longer a legitimate sporting contest, wrestling became pure entertainment under the guise of an athletic endeavour” (Beekman, 2006, p 52).

Litherland understands that professional wrestling became in its deceptive nature “a type of *enduring possible*, a stark reminder of the potential and legitimacy of sporting entertainments, and a very real set of counterfactual directions along which the sporting field might have continued. Furthermore, it retained sporting’s longer history with publicans, showpeople and other entrepreneurs” (Litherland, 2018, p 66).

To conclude, the original fabrication of the worked match opened the floodgates for further exploitation of the keys Goffman isolates that pertain to professional wrestling. Permanently engrained in combat sport folklore even if only on the merits of the controversy surrounding

the final battle, the Gotch vs Hackenschmidt undoubtedly changed the industry for the better, whether the disgraced fighters knew it or not. The popularity of the feud resided solely on the conflicting reports of Hackenschmidt's response to his first loss, famously conceding the initial defeat with grace in America, only to tell the London press of his discontent with the proceedings; Gotch, already known for his tendency to push the rules to their limits, allegedly emerged covered in oil in an attempt to stop Hackenschmidt from being able to work any Greco-Roman holds on the American, as well as engaging in other ungentlemanly tactics like eye gouging. Different theories exist as to the nature of these reports, Beekman argues Hackenschmidt wanted to protect his reputation in Europe (Beekman, 2005, p 47), whereas Shoemaker does not rule out the influence of underhanded journalism:

“Such was sometimes the nature of the sports writing world in those days; wrestling immediately evinced itself as the perfect vessel for such fictional storylines... when two fighters come to blows, each representing a different continent, it's not surprising that the perception of the ending will be different depending on what side of the world you're on” (Shoemaker, 2005, p 13).

This is just one of many examples of the semantic versatility of the documentary key as it pertains to professional wrestling – Goffman himself makes a point to note the key's power to “inhibit original meanings” (Goffman, 1986, p 69) - and Litherland states of the use of similar melodramatic narratives in the marketing of ostensibly legitimate sport:

“Professional wrestling did not invent this model of reporting, but it is the one sport to have crystallised and institutionalised it as a dominant mode of storytelling, and one that other sports frequently look for inspiration in their narratives and framing” (Litherland, 2018, p 114).

Organised combat, insofar as the visual cues provided from that activity, offer a perfect vessel for this narrative hyperbole to manifest, but as we have learned with the varied

applicability of Goffman's work, most (if not all) activity, regardless of purity, can be keyed for narrative effect. Take, for instance, Eric Bischoff's TEDxNaperville talk on professional wrestling's influence on the presentation of news media. Linking the two industries together, he explicitly states:

“The news media and professional wrestling use much the same formula, and politicians as well. They don't want you to think, they want you to feel” (TEDx Talks, 2018).

It is not out of the ordinary to suggest that news publications have the editorial power to paint celebrities and political figures alike in both positive and negative ways dependent on the manner in which their activity is reported, much in the same way politicians develop propaganda campaigns to discredit their opponents as societal villains whilst putting themselves on a pedestal as national heroes. Such provocative, almost extremist comprehensions of the world's formalities, if Bischoff is correct, borrow straight from the professional wrestling playbook.



### **2.3 Working vs Shooting – gimmicks and the ‘double cross’**

Isolating the fabrication of the match from its wider context, rigging the outcome of what claims to be a legitimate professional wrestling match for the benefit and subsequent enjoyment of the audience can be argued as a ‘paternal construction’, “performed in what is felt to be the dupe’s best interests, but which he might reject, at least in the beginning, were he to discover what was really happening” (Goffman, 1986, p 99). When framed within its apparent social purpose, the business of combat sport, the dupe transforms into the mark, the paying customer, a victim of deliberate misinformation, contained within what Goffman would call an ‘exploitative fabrication’: “one party containing others in a construction that is clearly inimical to their private interests” (ibid, p 103). Insofar as attempting to examine strips of activity containing keyings both for and against the collaborative construction of the fabrication, the worked match, and by extension the kayfabe lamination, can be better understood through elaboration on two of the jargon terms commonly associated with professional wrestling: the ‘work’ and the ‘shoot’.

It might be fit to envision all activity pertaining to the perpetuation of fabricated competition as examples of ‘worked’ behaviour insofar as it is constructed in support of the world in which the economic health of the professional wrestling industry and its workers is reliant on; this may be better understood as the guided doing of professional wrestling in its performative context. Through mere participation in the world in which the fabrication claims to be, that being a legitimate sporting community, one contributes to the logic and lineage of the kayfabe lamination, insofar as the strips of performance ‘usually’ employed during a legitimate professional wrestling bout are keyed into the rim of the fabrication through the gimmicking process, arriving within the kayfabe lamination, therefore performed ‘in’ kayfabe

– this forms both the sporting and moral syntactics of the many gimmicks within the paternal construction of the kayfabe lamination.

‘Shoot’ behaviour is understood as motivated by the guided doing of professional wrestling as an occupation, covering the acknowledgement or exploitation of collusion, the conscious dialogue around the constructions of the gimmicks supporting the overarching fabrication. Therefore, the work/shoot dichotomy exists to accurately signify activity keyed inside and outside of the kayfabe lamination, with ‘work’ “not [connoting] athletic ability or strength, but instead the ability to perform well” (Kerrick, 1980, p 143), and ‘shoot’, taken from the pugilistic strategic fabrication of ‘shooting for a takedown’, indicating an accidental or deliberate deviation from the intended performance, or acknowledgement of the exploitative nature of the fabrication altogether, therefore outside of the kayfabe lamination. Of special interest here are the ways in which the kayfabe lamination, as a permanently live social space, can be exploited through employment of ‘shoot’ behaviour, considering the very real threat of legitimate dominance and humiliation throughout the performance of these very traits – keyings, if you will.

Regarding the gradual transition from ‘shoot’ to ‘worked’, Beekman reports:

“A handful of promoters, managers, and wrestlers were the driving force behind this shift. Many of them emerged from carnival backgrounds and displayed the influence of that business’s view of customers as ‘marks’ to be duped and exploited”,

and by introducing the worked match as part of the wrestling repertoire:

“through cooperative effort promoters could dominate the sport and effectively eliminate the bargaining power of independent-minded wrestlers” (Beekman, 2006, p 54).

Their answer to the boredom inherent in the largely lacklustre wrestling action was to completely manipulate the strategic fabrications found in the legitimate professional wrestling bout: “This involved controlling wins and losses for maximum dramatic effect, and keeping control over champions. In turn, matches offered more exciting and entertaining wrestling holds, throws and counters” (Litherland, 2018, p 67). One of these influential promoters, Jack Curley, established a dominance of the northeast, New York centered market, recognising that “the inherent rhythms of American amusements were predicated on speed and immediate results”, spearheading a “variety of rule changes, including the adoption of time limits, referee’s decisions... and the increasing usage of one-fall matches” (Beekman, 2006, p 54), with the Gold Dust Trio (Ed ‘Strangler’ Lewis, Toots Mondt and Billy Sandow) taking control in the mid-west, recognising:

“...in ways that initially eluded Curley, that the worked nature of professional wrestling could be used to generate more excitement... Finishes that became staples of professional wrestling, such as out-of-ring count outs, double count outs due to head bumps, and ‘broadways’ (time-limit draws that ended just as one wrestler was about to win), all originated with the Gold Dust Trio” (ibid, p 57).

The entries in this formative theatrical inventory, through the dramatic manipulation of the ‘finish’, are make-believe keyings of the framing limits one would normally expect from professional wrestling were it a legitimate contest, into an increasingly dramatized frame, therefore bringing with it a marginally different set of expectations that helped defined the gimmicks of the wrestlers themselves.

Beekman notes that the popularity of former college football players like Wayne ‘Big’ Munn, Gus Sonnenberg and ‘The Golden Greek’ Jim Londos in the 1920s “led promoters to recognize the potential windfalls associated with creating personas for wrestlers... an essential aspect for drawing fans to matches in which they had no vested, personal interest

(Beekman, 2006, p 64). Visual iconography helped craft these personas, with former collegiate footballers holding unsurmountable charm and youth being pushed as the 'faces', and uglier, more unsightly wrestlers being cast as 'heels'; this inherent moral divide apparently "a logical evolution of professional wrestling" in line with a similar narrative movement within the boxing industry that complimented the growing melodramatic ballyhoo of combat sport reporting (ibid, p 65). By the second World War, 'heel' behaviour was practiced in the form of "[tearing] the shirts off unfriendly referees, [using] ringside props... and [the taping of] knuckles to signify added punching power" (ibid, p 76), laminating within a fictional world the societally understood framing limits of the contest key for emotional provocation, in stark contrast to 'face' behaviour relating to the wrestler's adherence to these framing limits (the 'rules') in spite of such obvious handicap. Wrestlers that were not physical specimens were often given personas reminiscent of comic books and films, the collective move towards gimmickry at the behest of legitimacy reflecting:

"...a trend during the Depression decade for Americans to seek out the myths and folklore of the rural, pioneering spirit in an attempt to counter the industrialization and urbanization that became negatively linked to the nation's economic dislocation" (ibid, p 76).

The worked match itself also developed to a point that it could consistently accommodate to the marketability of a wrestler's gimmick regardless of their level of legitimate grappling ability – "Londos possessed a drawing power that more than overcame his very average mat skills" (Beekman, 2006, p 64) – allowing for the exploration of dramatic tension within the matches themselves through the signs conveyed by the performance of the contest's strategic fabrications. The organic development of these gimmicks meant that by the early 1930's, the professional wrestling industry "proved to be highly lucrative for wrestling promoters" (ibid, p 65), and by retaining the aesthetic features of a legitimate sporting contest throughout the theatrical development of the worked match, professional wrestling

became, to its players, a melodramatically amplified keying of the 'contest' key, whilst simultaneously containing the paying observer in an increasingly elaborate 'exploitative' fabrication of the very same contest key. This period of history was therefore not without complication, and the interplay between performance (work) and occupation (shoot) often allowed for the exploitative nature of the industry to permeate its own kayfabe.

In 1920, under Jack Curley's instruction, Joe Stecher dropped the original World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship in a 'worked' match to Ed 'Strangler' Lewis after receiving a 'shoot' injury that vastly decreased the former champion's touring abilities. In response to feeling that "Curley betrayed him by not standing up to the New York commission when that body made Lewis's headlock illegal" (Beekman, 2006, p 57), Lewis conspired against Curley with Billy Sandow and Joe 'Toots' Mondt, forming the Gold Dust Trio, attempting to gain control over the ungoverned wrestling market in America. This was achieved through Lewis agreeing to drop the title to fellow Curley-owned alumni Stanislaus Zybyszko in 1921, paying Zybyszko to return the favour and drop the title back to Lewis in Madison Square Garden at an event not under Curley's jurisdiction. With Zybyszko seemingly under their thumb, the Gold Dust Trio strengthened their stranglehold on the industry by "building up the reputation of potential challengers. Title contenders engaged in carefully orchestrated series of matches calculated to establish them as legitimate opponents for [Lewis]" (ibid, p 58). Lewis's reign helped the trio navigate most of America collecting considerably sized ticket gates by employing the narrative devices listed earlier, the newly amplified drama of feuds with title contenders incentivising continued spectator engagement with the product. By the mid-20's however, Lewis's pool of worthy opponents was running thin, and coming to the conclusion that worked wrestling matches need not rely on the grappling skill, the trio decided to drop Lewis' title to relative newcomer and University of Nebraska football alumni Wayne 'Big' Munn. The trio's dominance of the industry ended with the same person that gifted them that capital, Stanislaus Zybyszko. Resenting being

ordered to “lose (known as ‘jobbing’) a number of matches in 1924” and still in contact with Curley, Zybyszko regained the World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship by turning his worked match with Munn, one he was booked to lose, into a ‘shoot’ – transforming the fabrication of a professional wrestling contest into a fabrication of the collusive nature of kayfabe itself, through the use of legitimate grappling skill to support the design of both fabrications – dominating the largely untrained Munn, only to drop the title back to the Curley-owned Stecher in a worked match, returning the capital that came with the World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship back to New York (ibid, p 59).

Such nefarious deviations from the scripts intention can be defined as a ‘double cross’, an instance in which the ‘worked’ finish of the match is negated or otherwise exploited by either party for their own personal profit, and can be further understood as an exploitative fabrication of the keying device that is the worked match, through the pretence of two wrestlers supposedly on the same page. We see an emphasis on collaboration within the industry in direct response to the growing worry of further exploitative fabrications of the work at hand, as promoters across the country created a territorial system through a ‘trust’ that eventually became the NWA (National Wrestling Alliance) monolith, led by the re-crowned king of the industry Jack Curley. In its segregated nature, “areas of the country [existed] as the exclusive domains of specific promoters” (Beekman, 2006, p 59), and multiple other wrestlers were allowed to hold their own version of the World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship whilst Curley’s chosen champion toured the New York area with his.

This did not quell the fears of further double crosses from wrestlers outside the trust, even in spite of Beekman’s claim that “the extensive reach of the trust allowed it to present the potentially career-ending threat of blacklisting for any wrestler unwilling to lose on demand”

(Beekman, 2006, p 60). Whilst “sportswriters engaged in a symbiotic relationship with athletes in which the ballyhoo of writers helped increase ticket sales for sporting events, while the athletes colluded with sportswriters in creating public images for the ‘physically famous” (ibid, 62), the editorial nature of the documentary key, evidenced through the growing dissemination of a sporting celebrity hierarchy, often contradicted the narrative of the promoters – Shoemaker states that by the time professional wrestling had become fully predetermined:

“Every year or two, some magazine would do a piece on the sport and slyly allude to its insincerity, but bizarrely a consensus never seemed to be reached on the subject” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 24)

This resulted in further interplay of ‘worked’ and ‘shoot’ activity for the purpose of exploitation. In response to sportswriters sceptical of professional wrestling’s purported reality portraying ‘trust-busters’ as legitimate title contenders, classically trained wrestlers signed by the trust “presented well-known independents too successful to be ignored the opportunity to wrestle ‘policemen””, the most famous of which being John Pesek:

“[the] master of the double wristlock-head scissors combination hold... appeared to enjoy injuring opponents, and his reputation for brutality dissuaded many independent wrestlers from challenging the trust” (Beekman, 2006, p 61).

These bouts were used to embarrass uncompliant wrestlers through defeat in visually convincing fashion, destroying their short-lived celebrity and the reputations of the writers that backed them, helping stabilize the kayfabe of the industry whilst retaining a vestige of legitimacy for anyone who dared question it.

Whilst the death of kayfabe, insofar as open acknowledgement of the fabrication, is often ascribed to Vince McMahon, a man named Jack Pfefer is noted as the first person to publicly expose professional wrestling’s dramaturgy. A promoter allegedly “favouring midgets, giants,

and lady wrestlers” was seen as troublesome to the likes of Curley, “[insistent] on protecting the realism of the sport above all else” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 27). After being ostracised by the trust after a number of successful years in the industry, Pfefer “launched a massive public campaign to discredit the trust in particular and professional wrestling in general... he routinely passed the prearranged results of matches to New York *Daily Mirror* sports editor Dan Parker” (Beekman, 2006, p 68), and in 1933, the “New York State Athletic Commission intervened, insisting that pro wrestling label its bouts ‘exhibitions’ rather than ‘matches’ – a then significant distinction” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 28), forcing the ‘sport’ into addressing itself somewhat through the ‘technical redoing’ key going forward.

Shoemaker makes the valid point that by breaching the code of secrecy that kayfabe imposed that:

“at the very least, the subject of wrestling’s legitimacy was finally broached, and moving forward, journalists – and fans – could approach the sport with something approaching ironic distance” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 27).

However, Pfefer’s disclosures undoubtedly stunted the fiscal growth of professional wrestling as a whole – Goffman notes of the distinctive fragility of fabrication that, if revealed as false, “can sharply alter the capacity for those involved to participate together in that kind of activity again” (Goffman, 1986, p 86) – further impacted by a national recession that meant with the population’s “disposable income sharply reduced, many former followers of wrestling spent their remaining dollars on other forms of entertainment” (Beekman, 2006, p 70). This destroyed the stranglehold of the trust who failed to realise that “maintaining the appearance of validity was a losing quest” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 27), and by 1938, Pfefer “had reclaimed his career and he alone was ruling the wrestling world, largely by being the one who embraced the unreality of the sport... [assuming] the throne by basically admitting that he was fixing matches” (ibid, p 28). To maintain professional wrestling’s viability as a career,



promoters challenging Pfefer's capital from this point onwards "made the fateful decision to focus on developing wrestlers who possessed drawing power, with increasingly little regard given to knowledge of holds", paving the way for the development of "gimmick matches and bizarre wrestling personas" over "catch-style legitimacy" in the coming decades (Beekman, 2006, p 71).

## **2.4 Conclusion to pugilism analysis – the ‘closed’ kayfabe**

We have discussed the start of professional wrestling’s gradual move towards ‘worked’ theatricality from its ‘shoot’ pugilistic roots, establishing the process of how concepts are keyed into the lamination of kayfabe, exactly where those keyed strips of activity are patterned from, and how the pretence of combat can be manipulated to further or hinder celebrity. The foundations of the kayfabe lamination were constructed through the performance of the strategic fabrications found in the worked match, closely followed by the deliberate structuring of title feuds over periods of time and the exploration of the ‘face’ vs ‘heel’ dynamic – ‘make-believe’ fabrications of the contest key’s framing limits that professional wrestling situates its melodrama within. By exploring the cultivation of celebrity within the sporting field and how the aforementioned gimmicks influenced professional wrestling’s interactions with social agents associated with the utility of the ‘technical redoing’ key (such as the sporting press and state athletic commissions), we have also highlighted the chaos that comes with ‘shoot’ behaviour – deliberate deviation from the ‘work’ (the scripted professional wrestling match), ultimately proving that regardless of the public’s ignorance of this following fact, professional wrestling has been legally required to disclose its predetermined nature as early as the 1930’s. It would be unsuitable to suggest that Edward Dean’s understanding of the ‘open’ kayfabe would be best applied this early on considering the examples of dramaturgical fortitude in the name of protecting kayfabe that we will explore soon, therefore this era is best referred to as the ‘closed’ kayfabe – what this disclosure does suggest, considering professional wrestling’s astronomical success in the decades after the economic roadblock of World War 2, is a societal and industry wide shift in the prioritisation of emotional provocation at the behest of the objective truth.

The influence that the carnival setting ended up having on training a generation of sporting entertainers in the 'shoot' era is echoed through the many wrestling schools and independent promotions in this ever exposed 'worked' era, the schools being 'technical rednings' of professional wrestling activity in their utilitarian function. The choice to simulate the strategic fabrications of legitimate professional wrestling matches may well have saved the industry, as the structure of the worked match helps wrestlers efficiently embody the values of the moral alignment their gimmick resides in, encouraging a dramaturgically consistent response from the crowd. Furthermore, there clearly exists a relationship between the portrayal and presentation of professional wrestling gimmicks and the societal expectations and transgressions they melodramatically simulate, hinting at an intentional interplay between the two frames of reality and kayfabe as early as the 1900's. It is the reality and weight of legitimate athleticism juxtaposed with the playfulness and imagination in which a simulation of combat is constructed that professional wrestling is often praised for, and it is this same interplay that the 'passion work' of professional wrestling is best imagined as, and the amount of trust required in the cultivation of such work should not be underestimated. The looming infamy and consequential neutering of the double cross rests in the uncanniness of industry exploitation playing out perfectly within the confines of what claims to be legitimate combat, with the contained party learning of his fate during a performance of defeat at the hands of their fabricators – art perfectly imitating life. Since a wrestler's celebrity is somewhat entirely based on their presentation within the kayfabe lamination, signifying activity as 'worked' or 'shoot' helps us understand the motivations behind the seemingly exploitative activity that presents itself with the perennially turbulent nature of kayfabe's interplay with reality.

In a more recent example of the unstable overlap between worked and shoot activity, MMA fighter and then-unsigned pro wrestling rookie Daniel Puder locked Olympic freestyle wrestling gold medallist and former WWE champion Kurt Angle in a legitimate kimura hold,

nearly breaking Angle's arm in a segment taped for *Smackdown* in 2004, unintentionally attempting to double cross him. Puder was a contestant on the reality TV show *Tough Enough* in which the winner would be offered a 'million dollar' WWE contract, and was present on *Smackdown* with his fellow contestants to promote the show. The segment was scripted to have the heel Angle berate the rookies, engaging some in what was universally understood as shoot grappling contests due to the assumption that Angle, a world class grappler, had complete control of the situation and did not need the cooperation of his fellow wrestler to portray dominance. When Puder stepped up and compromised the flow of the segment by engaging in actual combat and getting the upper hand, Angle and the referee present had the wherewithal to count a fast pin on Puder so as to not break the kayfabe – that being the narrative of Angle's dominance of the WWE roster at the time. Claiming that he had warned the producers of this segment about the chaos that could come from not efficiently signposting the expected behaviour of reality show contestants that were just following what little orders they had, Al Snow states that the unpredictability of 'shoot' activity in a 'worked' setting is exactly why "we try to as much as possible 'work' everything so that we don't allow for outcomes that we can't control in a public setting" (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016).

### **3.1 Introduction of the 'broadcast' key**

Scott Beekman claims that “the ballyhoo promoters of the 1930s altered the form of professional wrestling into something perfectly suited for a new medium set to sweep the nation” (Beekman, 2006, p 71). The medium in question was television, and the broadcasting of wrestling programming is the next framing issue we must discuss in our exploration of kayfabe. Whilst not specifically mentioned by Goffman, *Frame Analysis* is poignant in its widespread practical applicability, and one would suggest that, if ‘broadcast’ were named as a key, it may be fit to envision the broadcasting of contests or other factual events, be it through television or radio, as a close sibling of the documentary key, insofar as the key’s utilitarian ability as a ‘technical redoing’ to transmit strips of activity to a significant amount of people at once, in a communicative transaction that does not require direct feedback from the viewer or listener, otherwise known as dissemination.

As a tool for the dissemination of the kayfabe lamination, televised wrestling “brought significant changes to the sport... A focus on the need to attract viewers and keep them interested led wrestling promoters to push their product into new, gaudier forms with increasingly stylised and uncontrollable mock violence” (Beekman, 2006, p 84). Featuring more gimmick-heavy wrestlers, allowing “its performers to become popular cultural icons whose names could be used on touring posters” (Litherland, 2018, p 74), alongside creating the role of the ringside announcer – “the best offered not only continuity and simple play-by-play commentary but also heightened the excitement of matches and helped build interest in future encounters by skilfully directing interviews” (Beekman, 2006, p 83) – television transformed the standalone episodic fabrication of the worked match from a live, in-house setting, into an easily consumable serialized narrative more suited for home viewing.

Sharon Mazer says of Vince McMahon's influence on cementing this practice as the standard model of operation within the industry:

“When I began this research in 1989, professional wrestling was undergoing one of its periodic peaks in visibility and popularity, largely as a result of the way in which [Vince McMahon] had transformed the WWF's television presence, taking advantage of new technologies and techniques both in camera-work and in presentation” (Mazer, 1998, p 15).

With at least 6 hours of programming a week across multiple TV networks, alongside programming broadcast on a self-owned streaming service, WWE broadcasts in 2020 are painstakingly micromanaged from segment to segment, as evidenced by multiple instances of commentary formats surfacing online, and a recent leak of the production feed of one of the recent *NXT UK* television tapings. Whilst *RAW*, WWE's current flagship television show is filmed live every week, *NXT UK* shoots multiple episodes at a time on a near monthly basis, yet for both programmes the dramatic action is meticulously framed towards the hard camera, mostly ignoring the setting of the wrestling ring in the round for the live audience, in favour for a more 'end-on' experience for the televised audience. David Bixenspan notes:

“The best part of the rehearsals is seeing the run-throughs of segments in an empty arena that would be repeated later in front of the crowd. Some feel overdone for a performance art form that is at its most organic when mostly improvised, especially things like telling wrestlers where to stand during introductions” (Bixenspan, 2019).

Further evidence of the overabundance of dramaturgical direction can be seen in former WWE Cruiserweight Champion TJ Perkins' 'Ask Me Anything' thread on Reddit's SquaredCircle internet forum, responding to a question about the level of micromanagement in his WWE performances from backstage employees:

“Early in the day your producer sits down with you and a sheet of paper and insists you tell them every single move you will do and what part of the ring you will do it in... you get sent thru the curtain and the first thing that happens is the ramp camera man meets you at the top. He tells you to stop or go... so your entrance isn’t necessarily up to you either” (Perkins, 2019).

This very strict blocking, a far cry from previous scholarly understandings of the largely improvisational construction of a wrestling exhibition, is merely a by-product of the industry’s shift towards a more streamlined home viewing experience considering the vast amount of money tied to the broadcasting rights that WWE bestow to countries around the world. This not only helps monetise the performance of the wrestler through the regular dissemination of sporting celebrity, it allows the promoter complete control over the presentation of the kayfabe lamination, and in turn influencing the fabrication at large.

To summarise, televised wrestling has allowed for an organic change in the sport’s presentation through clever usage of camera angles to amplify or mask a wrestler’s physical activity, a commentary team to drive home the presented narrative should the bouts leave narrative gaps, and constant reinforcement of an almost hyperreal world in which every day struggles can be solved through organised combat. Furthermore, broadcasting as a keying device (hereby referred to as the ‘broadcast key’) has allowed for wrestling promotions to consistently promote themselves through the crafting of a visually consumable aesthetic, bestowing upon the wrestlers consistent exposure to an audience at home that has no choice but to accept the narratives given to them, which in turn forms the perception of their celebrity. Therefore, section 3 intends to explore exactly how television was efficiently harnessed to promote live events during the ‘closed’ kayfabe, how it was used as leverage to gain capital in further exploitative fabrications, as we foreshadow the rise of Vince McMahon’s WWF/WWE monolith, the transformation of the kayfabe lamination from ‘closed’ to ‘open’ and what that means for the spectator formerly contained in the fabrication.

David Shoemaker discusses the creation of (*Monday Night*) RAW in 1993 and the innovation in which WWE adopted the 'live-to-tape' format popularised by the NWA years prior and fusing it with the caricature we are used to today:

“...the thing that really set it apart [from competitors] was the combination of the WWF's cartoonery combined with the format's reality. The various NWA shows focused on wrestling's rough realism, but the WWF, with its neon spandex and immaculate production values, rendered the sport a new thing, a model of pop-cultural excess. By adapting the format of its old school rivals, the WWF found the path to the future” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 259).

What this brings forward then, is the multiplicity of professional wrestling activity, insofar as how the kayfabe lamination consists of multiple promotions employing differing extremities and understandings of what it means to fabricate (the 'real') through the make-believe key whilst pertaining to the same contest key, how the expectations of the 'real' are subject to change, and how the 'real' does not have to completely emulate the reality of the spectators. All that matters, is that the unreality claims to be the real and the spectators allow this to be without question.



### **3.2 The rise of McMahon – analysis of the ‘closed’ kayfabe**

Professional wrestling in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was a long way from realising its dramaturgical potential, and after Jack Pfefer’s dramaturgical disclosures, coupled with a national economic recovery from the effects of World War 2, promoters were once again working in cooperation with each other to preserve the fiscal continuity of the ‘closed’ kayfabe. Of note in this section will be the ways in which the lamination of the closed kayfabe was protected by the agents involved with the construction of the fabrication, and how the broadcast key transformed and would continue to radicalise the behaviour of promoters chasing capital. We will begin to see Vince McMahon impose his economic footprint on the industry, as professional wrestling slowly started to shed itself of carnival obfuscation into the bright lights of the mainstream.

The NWA (National Wrestling Alliance) was officially formed in 1948, a further effort to dispel the undermining of fellow promoters in the wake of “profits from the burgeoning television boom” (Beekman, 2006, p 84). In its creation, the NWA ruled that “promoters who poached wrestlers from other aligned promoters or scheduled cards within the territory of another NWA member faced ejection from the Alliance” (ibid, p 84). Lou Thesz was appointed the first unified NWA Heavyweight champion in 1949, and for the first prolonged period of time in nearly two decades, there was one nationally recognised world champion, “[proving] to be such a successful, and pliant, champion for the NWA that he retained the title until 1956” (ibid, p 85). Truly the last of a dying breed, his unparalleled grappling skills conveyed the vestige of legitimacy that not only protected Thesz from potential double crosses, but helped protect the purity of the sport’s original framing limits in an era that slowly started to leave its most ‘sporting’ elements behind. Another one of the more influential wrestlers of this period, thanks to the exposure of the broadcast key, was George Wagner, otherwise known as ‘Gorgeous’ George. Beekman argues that “the establishment of the NWA may have also

reflected promoters concerns that the star-making capabilities of television might create a celebrity wrestler too powerful to control” (ibid, p 86), and George is the earliest example of a wrestler that could have potentially fit that criteria.

Sauntering through the arena with pristinely rolled hair and extravagant robing as the crowd jeer behind him, Gorgeous George was the complete antithesis to his comparably basic peers both in appearance and manner; footage exists of him taking the time to pamper himself or order ringside attendants to pamper and perfume him, before stalling even further by throwing out his infamous ‘Georgie pins’ (safety pins that George was able to market and profit from) and ordering the referee to thoroughly check his opponent for any foreign objects. These behaviours are deliberately constructed by George in order to cement his role within the moral mythology of the worked match – he is clearly the antagonist, his dismissive actions outside of the ring complimented by his perceived royal arrogance and extravagantly camp demeanour inside it. It is not a coincidence that George’s heel character was centered around signs relating to effeminacy, as Sharon Mazer states that “his flaunting, taunting performances provoked loud, exuberant expressions of apparently homophobic antipathy in the audience” (Mazer, 1998, p 94), clearly a successful keying of the negative stereotypes of homosexual people at that time into the moral framework of the professional wrestling fabrication.

Beekman claims that, in George’s inherent parody of masculinity, “Wagner developed a ring character that established several of the nonverbal clues fans recognize as denoting a heel; a character so successful it continues to be copied today” (Beekman, 2006, p 86). On that innovative end, George’s persona during televised interviews was a direct extension of the character he portrayed in the ring, as Beekman reports:

“George always remained in character for his interviews, a task that proved difficult for many later wrestlers, and engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the press in which they gained sales and he expanded his role as a celebrity” (ibid, p 87).

With coverage of professional wrestling in a state of recovery after the Pfefer scandals, the exposure that George achieved with this gimmick redefined what it meant to be successful within the industry, as Beekman continues:

“George can be viewed as the first modern professional wrestler in that he abandoned antiquated notions of striving to become world champion to achieve celebrity” (ibid, p 88).

Much like how we do not see actors and actresses base the success of their careers on the achievements of the characters they play, success did not equal the possession of the sport’s top ‘competitive’ prize. Instead, celebrity measured success more accurately through the monetisation involved with the strategic dissemination of constructed persona, Gorgeous George proving this with his dramaturgical skill within the squared circle combined with the relationship he would foster with the nation’s press by ‘living the gimmick’.

As the kayfabe lamination started to infect the integrity of the spaces found within the documentary and broadcast keys, measures had to be taken to protect the perception of the sport. Ostracization was commonplace for promoters not willing to adhere to the rules that the NWA imposed, and in the case of “John Doyle, a Los Angeles booker-promoter with NWA membership”, he left in disgust of the NWA’s bullying tactics, and upon his return to professional wrestling in 1955, “retaliated by informing the Department of Justice of the Alliance’s illegal practices” (Beekman, 2006, p 98). The civil suit claimed:

“The NWA violated numerous antitrust statutes. Specific violations included the NWA’s recognition of individuals as exclusive promoters and bookers in a designated territory, prevention of promoters and bookers from doing business in other

territories, restriction of matches to certain areas and only to bookers or promoters affiliated with the NWA, and the requirement that bookers schedule matches exclusively through NWA promoters” (ibid, p 99).

The damning amount of evidence, coupled with the fear of another downturn in profit should the suit become public knowledge, forced the NWA to “quietly settle with the government”, promising to abolish NWA bylaws that allowed for such monopolising behaviour. The federal government accepted this, concluding its investigation into the professional wrestling industry, helping preserve the specifics of the industry’s fabrications from the public (ibid, p 99). This line of thought, being the adherence to the con through any means necessary, undoubtedly directed the behaviour of wrestlers across the country, prompting many to follow in the footsteps of Gorgeous George by similarly living their gimmicks, their behaviour outside the setting of the worked match in key with the projected gimmick of the wrestler.

Historically, being caught travelling to shows with your ‘rival’ was one of wrestling’s cardinal sins, but many examples exist where this has happened and the kayfabe has been compromised, the most notable in 1975. A plane, carrying NWA executive David Crockett, three heels (including the future ‘Nature Boy’ and WWF champion Ric Flair), and a babyface Mr. Wrestling, crashed on route to a show in North Carolina. With the two heels not named Ric Flair having to retire through injury (Flair himself was told he would never wrestle again after having broken his back), Mr. Wrestling, born George Burrell Woodin, was similarly injured, but:

“...while lying in a hospital bed, and with no way of knowing if his compatriots were alive or dead, Mr. Wrestling provided his true name and then lied about his job to preserve the illusion of wrestling. He knew that if word got out that a good guy, the owner of the company’s brother and three bad guys were all on the same plane, it could ruin that illusion forever... whispers began to circulate that Mr. Wrestling was

indeed on that fateful flight. Unwilling to expose the secrets of the business, Mr. Wrestling donned his mask and had a match under extreme duress and enormous physical pain to “prove” that he could not have been involved in the accident” (O’Connell, 2017).

With Ric Flair coining Mr. Wrestling as the man who saved wrestling, Woodin’s willingness to protect kayfabe was just part and parcel of the camaraderie and respect that wrestlers would bestow upon their fellow players and the lineage of the sport, the undying adherence to kayfabe outside of the ring helping keep business afloat at a time where agents in the industry did not know what the repercussions of not doing so would entail. One could even suggest that adherence to kayfabe, even in spite of it’s obvious deception, is the wrestler’s way of showing their appreciation for the paying audience without compromising the ‘authenticity’ of the performance, as opposed to explicitly thanking the audience for their approval like a celebrity that plays a popular character on TV might on their social media accounts. As Al Snow states to his trainees:

“Kayfabe is never stopping selling the gimmick of wrestling... it’s your business, so it’s up to you to protect it, because if you guys don’t respect it and don’t protect it, who will?” (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016).

Despite such adherence to ‘reality’, it became the rise of caricature that separated the future WWF/WWE from its NWA rivals, further redefining the ‘framing limits’ of kayfabe. The seeds of this change stemmed from a decline in live event ticket sales in the 1950s for promotions with television coverage, the understanding being that overexposure on television would disincentivize viewers from attending stadiums and venues since they were seeing the product from their own home (Shoemaker, 2015, p 40). One promotion remained an anomaly: Capitol Wrestling. Owned by Vince McMahon’s father, Vincent J. McMahon, in cooperation with wrestling pioneer Toots Mondt, Capitol joined the NWA in 1953. Their

regionally aired wrestling program dramatically increased their live event ticket sales, and by the time the original 'Nature Boy' Buddy Rogers won the NWA title whilst contracted to Capitol in 1961, the NWA faithful had grown weary of McMahon's power and the changing of the guard that the "more form than substance" Rogers presented when compared to the relatively old-school NWA stalwart Lou Thesz. After the NWA demanded Rogers drop the title back to Thesz, McMahon defected from the alliance on the back of their regional dominance, in turn nullifying the title change and building their own wrestling empire under the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) banner. Shoemaker alleges:

"The NWA carried on after the defections, but the Territorial Era's death warrant had been signed. Though the NWA didn't immediately dissolve, the two factors that would spell out its end as a national power had already appeared: the secession of the WWWF and the advent of cable television" (Shoemaker, 2015, p 43).

Here, we are seeing the start of a growing multiplicity from the kayfabe lamination, in which different promotions create their own kayfabe lineage and worlds, with dramaturgical logics wholly different to its competitors, yet it all still pertain to the same 'sport'.

By the early 80's, cable television became the norm in US households, and televised wrestling had been efficiently and consistently harnessed as a tool to promote live events. WWWF had rebranded to the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), and Vince K. McMahon had bought all majority shares from his father. Embroiled in yet another of professional wrestling's many battles for capital, and with the acquisition of future megastar Hulk Hogan after his appearance in the *Rocky* film franchise as 'Thunderlips', McMahon was able to financially muscle his way into owning all the nationally available timeslots for pro wrestling by purchasing majority shares in the rival NWA affiliated promotion Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW):

“[Jim] Barnett and the Briscoe brothers, who together held the majority of the company’s stock, recognised earlier than most that the WWF’s momentum made the NWA’s survival highly unlikely. Armed with that knowledge, they decided to accept a buyout from McMahon before he completely bankrupted their promotion... For McMahon this not only eliminated one of the few promotions that could derail his efforts but also gave him control of the company’s TBS time slots. Overnight the WWF became the only wrestling promotion with national coverage” (Beekman, 2006, p 122).

July 14th, 1984 was dubbed ‘Black Saturday’, as McMahon appeared on television in front of the World Championship Wrestling banner to introduce his brand of pro wrestling to the disdain of the GCW faithful. Shoemaker states of the diversity between the two brands:

“Here was a separate world, with different wrestlers and a wholly different concept of the wrestling enterprise. Where the NWA as a whole – and GCW in particular – had become increasingly gritty and realistic, the WWF was gaudy and cartoonish, a parade of outsize gimmickry” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 45).

GCW fans unsurprisingly revolted against the WWF “via a mass-letter-writing campaign” (ibid, p 46), rejecting the narrative that McMahon presented to them, foreshadowing a change in the audience’s role in the direction of the wrestling product as McMahon abandoned the timeslot to focus attention elsewhere.

### **3.3 Introduction to the 'open' kayfabe**

To summarise, we have discussed the 'closed' kayfabe being explored in a more public setting thanks to the transformational power of the broadcast key, and the trials and tribulations of navigating that climate as the broadcast key's potential for attaining capital increased exponentially, a change Vince McMahon would exploit to the best of his ability by further monopolising the television market. Also discussed is the role of 'respect' in the performance and perpetuation of the kayfabe lamination outside the immediate setting of the wrestling event – as we discuss the changes of the 'open' kayfabe, this notion of respect from performer to audience runs parallel to the respect the audience member bestows upon the wrestler through merit of agreeing to the terms of the fabrication.

In 1989, Vince McMahon declared to the New Jersey Athletic Commission that “their matches did not represent legitimate athletic contests because the victors were predetermined”. McMahon wanted to define professional wrestling as 'sports entertainment' in order to avoid paying state licencing fees for holding combat sport events, and Beekman reports that whilst “McMahon's decision to break the kayfabe led to the abolition of licensing fees [it] also made him an arch-villain to many in the industry” (Beekman, 2006, p 131). It is this point in history that Edward Dean points to when depicting the transformation of kayfabe from 'closed' to 'open'. According to Nick Rogers, today's kayfabe is:

“...an unspoken contract between wrestlers and spectators... we'll present you something clearly fake under the insistence that it's real, and you will experience genuine emotion. Neither party acknowledges the bargain, or else the magic is ruined” (Rogers, 2017).

In this change rests a significant change in the construction of a professional wrestling event, insofar as the audience's acknowledgement of the con at hand. What was once a purposely



obscured exploitative fabrication, became a collaborative make-believe keying of everything from organised combat, to the melodrama professional wrestling borrows its depictions of masculinity from. Therefore, this section intends to expand on how the transformation of kayfabe from 'closed' to 'open' presented itself, and how the industry radicalised their understanding of what it means to act 'in kayfabe' to accommodate the growing needs of their consumer base.

Considering the infamous 1984, nationally televised *20/20* report on professional wrestling that saw John Stossel slapped by the hulking David Schultz for calling into question the legitimacy of professional wrestling (Mazer, 1998, p 152) - Schultz has since claimed that he did this on McMahon's orders to protect the already compromised kayfabe in its contained state – professional wrestling's continued presence in the mainstream should be applauded, especially considering the invitation came about through coincidence. Shoemaker reports:

“A fortuitous meeting on an airplane between WWF (on-screen) manager Captain Lou Albano and pop star Cyndi Lauper – whose (real-life) manager and boyfriend Dave Wolff was a wrestling fan – led to Albano playing Lauper's father in her 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun' video, and then to Lauper appearing on WWF television” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 119).

Stating that “Albano's appearance on MTV was bizarre simply for the fact that he took his persona from the (putatively nonfictional) wrestling world and transposed it wholesale into the (obviously fictional) music video enterprise” (ibid, p 170), Shoemaker notes the uncanniness of Albano's caricatural presence within the framing of a music video's obviously fictional world at a time when wrestling still took itself seriously enough to actively hide its own fabrications. Taking advantage of the nationwide publicity, Beekman states:

“McMahon and Lauper's management then built a feud between Lauper and Albano over his alleged sexist attitudes. Both cut promos that ran on WWF programs and

MTV. The cross-promotion helped both sides... McMahon proclaimed his product 'Rock 'n' Wrestling' and built the Lauper-Albano feud into a major wrestling event. The feminist angle eventually led well-known figures such as Gloria Steinem and Geraldine Ferraro to make public statements in support of Lauper" (Beekman, 2006, p 125).

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1985, WWF "drew the largest audience in MTV history" (ibid, p 125) in a televised match between Lauper's stand-in Wendi Richter and the Fabulous Moolah, culminating the feud. WWF and MTV continued a working relationship as professional wrestling grew into the televised entertainment repertoire, introducing:

"...the pop culture mainstream to McMahon's new, Technicolor take on old-school rasslin', and introduced the existing wrestling audience to the Rock 'n' Wrestling Era... Suddenly the WWF, with [Hulk] Hogan as its figurehead, was everywhere, and pro wrestling as a whole was once again emerging as a cultural force" (Shoemaker, 2015, p 120).

Shortly after this, WWF held its first *Wrestlemania* pay-per-view event, which has remained as WWE's 'season finale' of sorts for over thirty years through the transactional semiotics of the pay-per-view key, a close relative of the broadcast key with extra weight on the significance of the broadcast's content through way of paywall.

Hulk Hogan was undeniably instrumental in pro wrestling's early mainstream appeal. Leaving the Verne Gagne owned American Wrestling Association (AWA) in 1983 after playing fodder to their technically superior champion Nick Bockwinkel, McMahon essentially built his monopoly around the red and yellow clad Hogan, and "with his chiselled body, boundless energy, and arsenal of catch-phrases, Hogan perfectly fit the mold of the new generation of professional wrestlers" (Beekman, 2006, p 123). In terms of gimmicking the strategic fabrications found within legitimate combat, McMahon took influence from the Gold

Dust Trio and developed a framework for Hogan's matches in efforts to hide his lack of grappling skill:

"His matches, whenever possible, would be short, with Hogan's heel opponent, controlling the action until the WWF star made a miraculous recovery (fuelled by fan excitement) and quickly dispatched the villain" (ibid, p 124).

Hogan's reign as WWF champion and the face of the promotion in such limelight echoed the aesthetic of McMahon's kayfabe, and:

"...with slick production values, mass marketing, and a mind-numbing array of merchandise, WWF wrestlers possessed a vibrancy lacked by the blander AWA or southern-tinged NWA performers" (ibid, p 124).

Instead of exclusively platforming technically proficient wrestlers with some identifying attributes, WWF prioritised the cultivation of gimmicks, assigning nationality/ethnicity and occupation to their dramaturgical inventory across the board.

For example, Irwin R. Schyster, a tax collector wrestling in full business gear, in his obsession with money presented signs of "the stereotypes associated with antisemitism" (Benton, 2015, p 407), a performance that almost by ritual commenced with Mike Rotunda, an American with no known Jewish roots, walking into the performance space asking the crowd if they've paid their taxes, to unanimous boos. Furthermore, Hogan's main foil, Andre the Giant, stood well over 7-foot-tall due to his acromegaly that overproduced his growth hormone. As big as his name purports, Shoemaker states of the many urban legends that followed him through his career in the mythologised wrestling industry:

"when Andre was involved, the mythologizing always hit fever pitch. It's a testament to his outsize greatness that reality – as impressive as it was – couldn't do him justice" (Shoemaker, 2015, p 156).

Wrestlers, in their utmost caricature, now embodied the speed and the urgency desired from the American amusements that shaped wrestling's storied history, and it would be the intertwining of such hyperbole with the performing of the objective truth of man's struggles that would give professional wrestling its distinctive, rebellious charm through the nineties and the turn of the new millennium.

By the mid 90's, the federal trial of Dr. George Zahorian had shed light on some of the more unsavoury practices in the industry, forcing agents to make certain decisions regarding the presentation of their celebrity under the kayfabe lamination. Beekman reports:

“Zahorian, a member of the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission, served as the WWF's house doctor for the syndicated TV show tapings in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Prosecutors found receipts in Zahorian's files that showed regular drug shipments to McMahon, Hogan, Roddy Piper, and a host of other wrestlers” (Beekman, 2006, p 131)

McMahon, experimenting with his new bodybuilding venture in an attempt to build wrestling megastars without having them fill up space on his wrestling shows, had to abandon the World Bodybuilding Federation (WBF) project as his “reputation suffered significant damage”, publicly admitting to experimenting with steroids with Hogan in a rare moment of vulnerability for the promoter (ibid, p 132). Hogan's celebrity was similarly damaged, partly due to his reluctance on admitting his part in the scandal – appearing on the *Arsenio Hall* show in 1990, he publicly stated that “I'm not a steroid abuser, I do not use steroids”, before backtracking in his testimony at the trial of McMahon over conspiracy for steroid distribution with Zahorian – Hogan claims that he “was worried about destroying all the good I had done with the Hulk Hogan character. Because of me, kids were living by the code of training, prayers, and vitamins, and I didn't want them to think that I'd given them bad advice” (Wrestlelamia, 2019). Whilst nefarious in his untruths, Hogan recognised that such

behaviour contradicted the presented kayfabe lamination, and out of respect to its exaltation, attempted to dispel the steroid abuser narrative, only to discover that such activity is often exempt from being 'kayfabled' in its consequential nature.

### **3.4 The ‘worked shoot’ – conclusion to historical analysis**

This section will explore aspects of the open kayfabe in which the lamination of kayfabe is purposely keyed over what ‘pertains’ to be activity not usually associated with the performance. More specifically, we will explore the worked shoot, “a storyline-incident that blurs the boundaries between the predetermined lie of ‘work’ and the legitimate truth of ‘shoot’” (Koh, 2017, p 461), an effective dramaturgical technique to generate audience interest in the wrestling product, used widely throughout the transformation of kayfabe from closed to open. Worked shoot promos can address anything from the morale of the performer, to other competing promotions, and stage names are often disregarded to connote the air of reality.

Worked shoots are often best conceptualised as make-believe keyings of the exploitative fabrications one might find in such a provocative and unforgiving industry, often involving strips of activity both inside and outside of the kayfabe lamination. This is best evidenced by CM Punk’s worked shoot promo on the June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011 edition of *RAW*:

“[CM Punk] sat down on the entrance ramp, a liminal site that is literally between the action in the ring and the writers watching backstage, and discussed backstage politics. He talked about the behavior of previous main-event wrestlers, him being misused as a performer, and how he wanted—but was not optimistic for—change in the company” (Koh, 2017, p 465).

Benjamin Litherland argues that one of the enduring appeals of professional wrestling is the search for authenticity:

“For engaged audiences, as well as enjoying the athleticism, showmanship, and storytelling of a good wrestling match, the text, live or televised, was examined for

pockets of 'authenticity' or moments where kayfabe and its own internal logic bend or break" (Litherland, 2018, p 104).

Punk's promo was littered with strips of activity deliberately placed to evoke this kind of reaction: his 'shoot' grievances were authentic and well known to the average 'smart' fan, performed passionately enough to convey the story to the casual watcher. He made reference to social agents typically understood as outside the kayfabe lamination, such as other wrestling promotions, his friend and former WWE employee Colt Cabana, and backstage employees not referenced on screen as a part of the fictional world, literally breaking the fourth wall by speaking directly to the camera and stating that he was doing so, behaviour typically understood through 'shoot' ideology. Yet, he made efforts to retain his heel heat acquired by accosting WWE champion John Cena by accusing the 'WWE Universe' of being complicit in the failings of the company, and signposted a part of his dialogue as a cue for the sound technician to cut his microphone off, indicating a 'worked' motivation to the performance.

The notion of transforming unavoidable or unarguable truths about the nature of the business would have proved impossible through the enduring power of the closed kayfabe. In the 'unspoken contract' of the open kayfabe, comes the acceptance of professional wrestling as a form of entertainment first and foremost, and the potential for further innovation. This new found narrative helped drive the WWF and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) into a 'Monday Night War', as both promotion's flagship television shows (*RAW* and *Nitro*, respectively) aired head to head on a weekly basis in a battle for television ratings and, once again, capital. The formerly named GCW's assets had been purchased by the Ted Turner owned Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) after the original promoters, Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP), nearly bankrupted themselves trying to compete with McMahon. Beekman claims that "[Eric] Bischoff used Turner's deep pockets to transform WCW's product into a slick vehicle capable of challenging the WWF" (Beekman, 2006, p 133), with

this activity tracing back to then WCW promoter Eric Bischoff's acquisition of a multitude of former WWF megastars, including but not limited to 'Macho Man' Randy Savage, Lex Luger, and 'The Million Dollar Man' Ted Dibiase. Wrestlers appearing in other promotions was not new; the urgency provided by a live, gritty, Ted Turner funded *Nitro* as opposed to the buffoonish, comparably antiquated live-to-tape *RAW* was however impressively new, and talent being showcased on the live show just days after being on the pre-taped show would generate publicity and intrigue. On the first night of *RAW* and *Nitro* going head to head in 1995, Bischoff, acting as one of the announcing team, infamously revealed the results of the pre-taped *Raw* that he was competing against, breaking "one of wrestling's unwritten rules – not to ever acknowledge your competitors on air" (ibid, p 133), a subtle yet significant change in the framing limits of the kayfabe lamination.

Another one of the more notable examples of WCW transforming the real into the 'real' can be traced back to the previously mentioned string of acquisitions, namely Kevin Nash and Scott Hall. Previously Diesel and Razor Ramon whilst under contract with WWF, Bischoff booked an angle where they would intervene 'uninvited' on the proceedings of *Nitro*, claiming to be from 'up north' and promising to destroy WCW from within:

"...evincing a subtle disregard for the kayfabe code.... They were presented not as Razor and Diesel... but as the actual guys behind the characters: Kevin and Scott, two regular dudes setting out to break the fourth wall... it was a parable of WWF's industry dominance, and through this storyline around WWF stars, WCW planned to wrest control of the wrestling world from the competition" (Shoemaker, 2015, p 263)

The reveal of none other than seemingly perennial face, bonafide megastar and more importantly, former WWF employee Hulk Hogan as the 'third man' in what would be the initial members of the New World Order (stylised nWo), completely broke the logical expectations of the fans, and in a flash, "wrestling storylines went from elementary Good vs.



Evil rehashings to postmodern meditations on the nature of the sport” (ibid, p 164). Before long, WCW strayed ahead of WWF in the ratings for the first time and continued to beat them for 84 straight weeks, and “for the first time in more than a decade, McMahon could not claim to head wrestling’s most successful promotion” (Beekman, 2006, p 134).

Arguably the biggest blurring of reality in this period, and the moment that borne the evil authority figure in the Mr. McMahon character, stemmed from the WWF’s fiscal insecurity as they battled with WCW for supremacy within the broadcast key. Leading up to the 1997 edition of the Survivor Series pay-per-view held in his home country of Canada, “informed by McMahon that he was in financial dire straits” (Hart, 2010), Bret Hart had been urged towards signing a significantly lucrative contract for WCW, but still held the WWF Championship. As the weeks ran up on his WWF contract, Vince McMahon needed Hart to drop the belt to second in line and notorious backstage politician Shawn Michaels. The technically proficient, kayfabe respecting Hart and boisterous, fourth-wall breaking Michaels vehemently disliked each other, both men representing opposite poles on the ever-changing ethics of the wrestling industry, with aspects of the backstage drama being keyed into the lamination of kayfabe through the trading of verbal barbs on *RAW* as the company promoted the championship showdown. Shoemaker reports that:

“the WWF’s story is that solution after solution was shot down by Bret, and McMahon and company were left without a choice. Bret’s take is that McMahon took Bret’s reluctance as a guarantee and, instead of working for another solution, decided to sneak the championship away from him. What all parties agree upon is that McMahon conspired with Shawn and referee Earl Hebner so that when Shawn locked Bret in his own finisher, which was part of the script Bret had agreed to, Hebner would call for the bell as if Bret had tapped out” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 267).

Humiliated in front of his home country and in front of a worldwide televised audience, Hart retaliated by spitting in the face of McMahon and destroying the ringside area, all of this still being aired on pay-per-view to the WWF's worldwide audience, therefore technically 'in kayfabe'. The audience in Montreal, already aware of Hart's contractual predicament, mourned the loss with him and have been historically unforgiving in their jeers towards McMahon and Michaels over the years. Jim Cornette, wrestling promoter and researcher, in a 'shoot' interview with Kayfabe Commentaries, claimed that what became known as the 'Montreal Screwjob' was wrestling's first 'worked shoot' double cross:

“the idea of a double cross is you want to get the result you want without one of the participant's knowledge but without everybody else knowing that there's anything off-fuckin-kilter, they didn't do that! He went with the worked shoot double cross where he's specifically did those things to make sure that everybody knew that the fix was in except the guy actually getting fucked didn't know until afterwards...” (BRET HART, 2018).

Vince McMahon's on air, 'unbiased' character was compromised through the immediate fallout, and with the task of navigating a narrative for the newly secured WWF Championship in the weeks after Survivor Series that wouldn't insult the fans intelligence, McMahon was faced with a choice: double down on his decision to protect his business at the risk of alienating fans in such a pivotal time for the company, or embrace the fans derision and incorporate his real life 'heat' into his on air character. McMahon, essentially did both:

“It wasn't just an inversion of kayfabe – it was the one night where reality indisputably reigned... at the moment when these men first became fully human to us, kayfabe evolved, and the next night a newly evil Vince McMahon... explained to the WWF audience that 'Bret screwed Bret'. Reality was being written into wrestling's revisionist history” (Shoemaker, 2015, p 267).

Not even two months later, Vince McMahon appeared on *RAW* and gave his 'new directions' speech that formally stated WWF's intentions to evolve their programming to further fit audience expectations of a more adult themed product. Publicly offering a deviation from the simplistic moral dichotomies that the 'sport' based its mythology on, McMahon:

“...ushered in a new era in wrestling. No longer based around simple morality plays and the promotion of law and order and role models, WWF wrestling became, if not exactly adult, at least adult-themed” (Beekman, 2006, p 134).

McMahon's confession back in 1989 allowed professional wrestling to explore more creative avenues by allowing the presence of real life to intrude on the newly exposed logical boundaries of kayfabe, only for these boundaries to regurgitate such activity into wrestling's unreality, leading to the most infamous exploitative fabrication insofar as the Montreal Screwjob, etched into the lore of the kayfabe lamination as the event that defined the trope of the 'worked shoot'. One would think such an event would have cemented Vince McMahon's cathartic downfall – had McMahon not paved the way for such meta-theory to manifest in his product by confirming wrestling's scripted nature years earlier, such a shambolic display of business politics would have absolutely ruined his chances of winning the Monday Night Wars. Instead, as history tells us, the Montreal Screwjob assisted the WWF's newfound 'attitude' thrive, subsequently allowing McMahon to purchase WCW's assets in 2001.

The bulk of this scandal is featured in the 1998 documentary *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*. Infamous for its candid approach to Hart's craft and extensive fly-on-the-wall footage of the backstage areas of professional wrestling, the documentary is framed around Hart's insecurity surrounding the changing aesthetics of professional wrestling, with Michaels and McMahon representing the wrestling underbelly corrupting the minds of their fans – a

more literal allusion to the editorial power of the documentary key. Hart is seen visibly struggling with the idea of letting his Canadian fans down in such insurmountable storyline circumstances: he may well have been moving promotions for more money, but his wish of wanting 'to leave a Canadian hero' to preserve the relationship with his fans meant much more to him, and having this level of celebrity compromised within the confines of his own line of work may well have pushed Hart over the relative edge, approaching McMahon in the dressing room after the incident and punching him in the face (Jay, 1998). An entry into his Calgary Sun columns that Hart penned weekly further displays his dismay over WWF's actions:

"I am going to be very honest and open about a profession I love very much. A profession that has no guilt and no innocence, at least only in rare exceptions. It's not my intention to hurt pro wrestling in any way, but I do need to tell the truth" (Hart, 2010).

The otherwise consummate, kayfabe abiding professional felt like he had no choice but to save face in his career by going public about the developments of his contract disputes with Vince McMahon and the events leading up to that fateful day in Montreal:

"My career ended with my evil boss, that no-good Shawn Michaels and a cowardly referee, in the saddest way I ever imagined. They killed me. Oh sure, Bret Hart is okay. I always will be. But the Hitman, well, they murdered him, right there in front of the world. I spit in McMahon's face and dealt with him accordingly in the dressing room, but it still hurts a lot" (ibid).

An exploitative fabrication in that Hart was a contained party in a construction that led him to believe he was leaving Montreal with the title, in its deliberate presentation to the paying audience as a moral robbery of sorts, the fabrication was explicitly keyed back into the

kayfabe lamination through the permanence of the title change and the deliberate performance of corruption. The fabrication of the Montreal Screwjob, however, is itself constructed by multiple keyings with their own logics that rely on each other to generate the intended meaning of the collusive activity, that being the dramaturgical fibres of the kayfabe lamination. Therefore, such a transgression would have had an explosive knock-on effect on its involved parties, with on-screen gimmicks that now required a significant amount of 'regrounding', a transformational key resting on:

“...the assumption that some motives for a deed are ones that leave the performer within the normal range of participation, and other motives, especially when stabilized and institutionalized, leave the performer outside the ordinary domain of the activity” (Goffman, 1986, p 74).

It is this notion of 'regrounding' that perfectly explains how the boundaries and framing limits of the kayfabe lamination have transformed over the years, as wrestling promoters attempted to innovate wherever possible to generate publicity for their product – the most visual of these keyings being Vince McMahon's 'new directions' speech, given in the weeks after the ungrammatical activity found during the Montreal Screwjob.

#### **4.1 Introduction to academic analysis**

By now, we have established that the closed kayfabe introduced by promoters in the 'catch' era solely relied on the cooperation of the performers and promoters to maintain the fabricated construction of the worked match. Whilst originally introduced to maximise profit and capital from the unsuspecting mark, the implementation of dramaturgy within the sport evolved into a sign of respect from performer to audience, shown through the dedicated lengths that performers would reach to protect the true nature of the industry, the kayfabe lamination. Professional wrestling was then able to generate and manage an internal hierarchy of celebrity by introducing weekly television as a vital part of the business model, a framing that favoured dedication to the gimmicks of professional wrestling more so than typical understandings of 'talent' or skill. The open kayfabe, officially introduced by Vince McMahon in the late 1980's but academically understood to have existed in some sense long before then, bestowed upon promoters and wrestlers a larger sense of freedom in their dramaturgy with the allowing of real life events and concepts to intrude and become moulded by the narrative being presented. Furthermore, the dramaturgical technique of the 'worked-shoot', a storyline or instance in which the presentation of 'reality' is deliberately blurred through open acknowledgement of the con at hand, has become widely used as part of the professional wrestling dramaturgical inventory. It appears that the immersive power of the 'open kayfabe' has surpassed historic and outdated expectations of professional wrestling conduct, and in all its glory, forced the industry as a whole to move on from its segregated, illegitimate carnival roots, as Shoemaker explains that "To become a part of the cultural wallpaper today, pro wrestling had to absolve itself of its distinctiveness" (Shoemaker, 2015, p 175).

A promotion's logical boundaries, better understood as the kayfabe lamination's framing limits, are subject to change if signposted efficiently, and this has allowed caricature to

permeate a form of theatre that prides itself on the insistence of its own reality. Some of wrestling's most famous gimmicks are ripped straight out of the playbook of superheroes, supervillains, stereotypes and the supernatural, and whilst this may contradict a fan's understanding of the capabilities of reality, if the skill of the dramaturgy supersedes this, a level of respect from an audience can be generated, therefore protecting the presented narrative in its acceptance. It could be argued that our understanding of the open kayfabe, insofar as its ability to completely engross an audience despite their knowledge of the fabrication at hand, perpetuates what Edward Dean refers to as the 'post truth condition', defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and the personal belief". Dean's understanding of this perfectly encapsulates the inner workings of what it means to develop and maintain kayfabe, especially considering the wrestlers that 'lived the gimmick' and the provocative power of the 'worked shoot': "at the heart of the post-truth paradigm, there seems to lie an interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, and the precise boundaries of that interplay is frequently blurred" (Dean, 2018, p 2).

It can be argued that, in its postmodern exposure, the kayfabe frame/lamination has become an example of 'hyperreality', defined by Douglas Kellner in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as a space "in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life" (Kellner, 2019). Such a concept encourages the individual to "flee from the 'desert of the real' for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realm of computer, media, and technological experience" (Kellner, 2019). In a further understanding of the hyperbole congruent with hyperreal spaces, Benjamin Litherland states of the parallel between professional wrestling and fame in general that:

“Understanding how celebrity operates in professional wrestling, and then understanding celebrity culture more broadly as the exemplar expression of the melodramatic mode, are key to making sense of the sport” (Litherland, 2018, p 119).

The melodramatic mode is Litherland’s understanding of Peter Brooks’ ‘melodramatic imagination’, defined by Len Ang as:

“a type of imagination in which a (semi-desperate) attempt is made ‘to bring into the drama of man’s quotidian existence the higher drama of moral forces’... [applied by humanity] as a psychological strategy to overcome the material meaninglessness of everyday existence, in which routine and habit prevail in human relationships as much as elsewhere” (Ang, 1985, p 79).

The need for humanity to develop meaning from life’s mundanities, alongside being an indication as to the appeal of celebrity culture for the underprivileged, perfectly explains the dramaturgical appeal of professional wrestling in its construction of opposing moral poles that dutifully emulate the hierarchies and pitfalls of reality, and by experiencing the hyperreal nature of the melodramatic mode, audiences can situate themselves in a world in which a wrestler can do what an audience member only wishes they could.

Considering the kayfabe lamination as a sort of ‘hyperreal’ framing device, this section intends to interrogate postmodern professional wrestling academically, insofar as the specifics of what it means to cultivate or attend the social event of professional wrestling, and how such activity from players and observers contributes to or detracts from the potency of the kayfabe lamination. Goffman’s work on the ‘theatrical frame’ in *Frame Analysis* and ‘impression management in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* will be heavily featured as I propose a framework in which we could potentially apply this research to different strips of activity putatively unrelated to professional wrestling. Roland Barthes, in his poignant essay, *The World of Wrestling* originally written in 1957, predates professional wrestling’s



mainstream boom period by three decades, but aptly describes many of the conventions that professional wrestling would incorporate into its standard business model and later perfect. It also stands as the main focal point of most scholarly research into the theatricality of professional wrestling, therefore, if we are to further outline a framework for wrestling's dramaturgical techniques, interrogating Barthes' work is vital.

## **4.2 Semiotics and keying**

On the first page, Barthes makes the statement “Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque” (Barthes, 1972, p 15), referencing two 17<sup>th</sup> century plays from his native country, a comedy and a tragedy respectively. It is clear from this initial claim that Barthes is able to make parallels between the vast melodramatic elements of a wrestling contest and the plays that shaped the culture he was raised in, which in turn will have shaped a segment of his career as a literary theorist. A lot of this article circulates around Barthes’s attraction to the alleged ‘grandiloquence’ of the form, resulting in an “absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the sport” (ibid, p 16), showing a true understanding of the performative aspects that wrestlers employ to make the spectacle accessible to an audience otherwise unaware of the story at hand. We realise that when Barthes waxes poetic on the ‘immediate pantomime’ of wrestling, he is explaining his case for the form being the perfect vessel for semiosis. Barthes claims of the function of the ‘real’ wrestler, as opposed to the real combatant:

“Wrestling, on the contrary, offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning. In judo, a man who is down is hardly down at all, he rolls over, he draws back, he eludes defeat, or, if the latter is obvious, he immediately disappears; in wrestling, a man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness.” (ibid, p 16).

Barthes eloquently paints professional wrestling as a story between two (or more) parties that the paying public have no choice but to be “overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles” (Barthes, 1972, p 17). The wrestlers themselves are to look the very part of the moral spectrum their character resides on, resulting in an easily decipherable narrative that

encourages it's audience to respond faithfully to the actions presented in front of them, as analysed through the placement of a potentially hypothetical villain:

“Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body... displays in his flesh the characters of baseness, for his part is to represent what, in the classical concept of the *salaud*, the 'bastard' (the key-concept of any wrestling match), appears as organically repugnant. The nausea voluntarily provoked by Thauvin shows therefore a very extended use of signs: not only is ugliness used here in order to signify baseness, but in addition ugliness is wholly gathered into a particularly repulsive quality of matter... his actions will perfectly correspond to the essential viscosity of his personage” (ibid, p 17).

Voluntarily is the key word here, as Barthes notes the transactional relationship between the performance and its spectators. Explained as a 'diacritic writing', wrestlers portray sequences of episodic, physical action that results in a dualistic output: existing on surface level to fictionalise the concept of a 'fair' fight, it encourages the audience to respond impulsively to the actions at hand, affirming the moral alignment of the performer, therefore giving the performer an indication as to whether they're playing the role efficiently. Barthes explains further:

“Each moment in wrestling is therefore like an algebra which instantaneously unveils the relationship between a cause and it's represented effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in *seeing* the moral mechanism function so perfectly” (ibid, p 19)

Clearly, Barthes is referring to the 'passion work' of the worked match; character, movement and manner go hand in hand, and the sequencing of the moves that the face and heel perform also synchronise perfectly with the story of good and evil being told, complimented by the appropriate crowd response.

Therefore, if professional wrestling exists in Barthes's eyes as a semiotic vessel for the turbulence of human life, then one could argue that every staged action that perpetuates this conflict is 'keyed' from the primary framework of our own reality, into the theatrical framing of kayfabe's unreality. In reference to Goffman's initial definition of keying juxtaposed with Tyson Smith's understanding of the performance of emotion during passion work, if otter play demonstrates itself a keying of otter combat, then the question is raised as to whether the genre of theatre known as professional wrestling exists physically as a keying of the sport of pugilism, dramatically as a keying of the conflicts of everyday life, or even a seemingly inconstruable mixture of both. Considering the fact that wrestling promotions often follow and acknowledge the lineage and history of the industry at a time where such dramaturgical fabrications did not exist (therefore basing the 'sport' in the same 'world' as the spectator), the idea that professional wrestling exists as an intricate keying of the awareness of dramaturgy within our own primary frameworks (in layman's terms, wrestling being a metaphor for life itself) can surely be considered:

"What seems inescapable – regardless of the proximity or distance of the writer and regardless of theoretical orientation – is that professional wrestling is recognized and ultimately serves as a metaphor for social structures and meanings" (Mazer, 1998, p 7).

Even Barthes himself alludes to this notion of professional wrestling serving as a tragic reproduction of the human condition, even implying that an audience would always be more receptive to the scripted version of wrestling:

"We are therefore dealing with a real Human Comedy, where the most socially-inspired nuances of passion (conceit, righteousness, refined cruelty, a sense of 'paying one's debts') always felicitously find the clearest sign which can receive them, express them and triumphantly carry them to the confines of the hall. It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself..." (Barthes, 1972, p 18)

Keying within professional wrestling is not just limited to the strategic fabrications of in-ring action alone, as a keying can take any form so long as a sign vehicle is present. As evidenced through Barthes' depiction of the visibly grotesque Thauvin, the gimmicks of the wrestlers themselves are designed to illicit certain responses from the crowd depending on the social climate. For instance, Bret Hart's 'Canadian hero' persona can be understood as a keying of Canadian patriotism, evidenced through his pro-Canada rhetoric in his verbal performances, stating in one specific promo that "I'm not so much anti-American, as I'm just very, very, pro-Canadian" (RAW IS WAR, 1997). Litherland states of the historical use of cultural identity within wrestling that "race and ethnicity offered a simple way of delineating fighters whom the public were encouraged to support or reject" (Litherland, 2018, p 132), stating further on the semantic versatility of the documentary key as a whole:

"[Celebrity] offers cultural spaces where the melodramatic mode is performed, where forms of representation provide flattened-out characters that come to stand for wider ethical forces" (ibid, p 115).

We can see a clear parallel between the two cultural spaces of professional wrestling and celebrity in the sense that performers within these framings offer performances of ethics and values, deliberately constructed for society's consumption. Litherland aptly describes this marketing model:

"Garry Whannel, in the most serious examination of sport stars and moralities, has described the ways in which sporting celebrities have often been infused with 'discourses of moral censure'. These are very precisely how celebrities in professional wrestling are constructed, and reveals that professional wrestling offers a type of melodramatic mode that exists all across contemporary culture" (ibid, p 120).

Simply put, celebrity culture, like professional wrestling, uses Goffman's notion of keying to promote agents efficiently towards their target audience – this can be concluded through Litherland suggesting:

“While it does not defend or justify the stereotypes perpetuated, if sporting celebrities often serve as lightning rods for tensions and desires around nationality and race, then professional wrestling did the same” (ibid, p 120).

Therefore, if the keying of fighting offers the ‘cultural space’ of professional wrestling, and the keying of everyday moral conflicts produces the ‘melodramatic mode’ in which professional wrestling conflicts are constructed through, then the professional wrestling event as a whole may well be seen as a keying of celebrity culture (and vice-versa). Hart's candid column on the fallout of his unwelcome departure from WWF in the effort to protect his pro-Canada persona can be understood with more empathy than ever before:

“All I really wanted was to leave a Canadian hero. **At the least, my fans deserved that**” (Hart, 2010).

### **4.3 Fan participation and the 'theatrical frame'**

We have now established that the dramatic action inside and outside the ring is the deliberate, intricate construction of various keyings that help affirm the concepts of “suffering, defeat and justice” (Barthes, 1972, p 19) through the connotations of the culturally specific moral dichotomy within the opposing wrestlers’ performances. What is yet to be fully interrogated is the role of the audience in the upkeep of the kayfabe lamination, considering our analysis of the transformation of kayfabe from ‘closed’ to ‘open’. It may be fit to see the rim of the original fabrication of the closed kayfabe transform into a more inclusive framing as the nature of the fabrication is better understood by the audience member. Now that McMahon institutionalised what we understand as the open kayfabe as standard practice, the average audience member should be at least somewhat aware of the mere presence of the kayfabe lamination (‘you do know it’s fake, right?’), and in their voluntary participation at the event, now contributes to the theatrical world of professional wrestling by playing the role of professional wrestling fan.

Goffman’s dictation of the theatrical frame helps us understand this phenomenon further:

“It might be said, then, that a stage production was some sort of voluntarily supported benign fabrication, for the audience treats disclosure somewhat as they would that which terminates a leg-pull executed in good taste and all in fun. But leg-pulls involve the faking of real activity, whereas the stage uses materials that are frankly keyings – open mock-ups of dramatic human actions – and at no time is the audience convinced that real life is going on up there” (Goffman, 1986, p 136)

Goffman believes that a trip to the theatre involves the cooperation of both teams of performer and audience, and implies that whilst an audience member is aware of the fake-ness of the theatre, the information disclosed to them is presented as if it were as real

regardless, and would lose all meaning and purpose if it was presented any differently as it would remove the ability for the audience member to respond to the dramatic action in the manner they are inherently expected to. Goffman continues by presenting a number of 'conventions' that distinguish a theatrical keying from its real life alternative, including but not limited to the clear definition of the spatial boundaries in which the performance is to take place, the deliberate proxemic blocking of performers involved for the benefit of audience sightlines, and the unnaturally staggered dialogue of the performers that mechanically disclose aspects of the story to support its own chronological structure (ibid, p 139).

Professional wrestling follows these dramatic conventions through the placement of the ring in the round, usually residing in the centre of the arena and segregated by ringside barriers that act as a visual indication of the boundaries of the performance space. Dramatic action inside and outside of the wrestling matches allows for one performer (or team) at a time to be "given the focus of the stage, front and center" (ibid, p 140) through the pacing of a select match, and through the turn taking nature of the dialogue presented in the wrestler's verbal interactions with each other. What complicates the purity of the event at hand is wrestling's insistence on its own reality in spite of these obvious conventions, in stark contrast to a piece of surrealist theatre that at no point tries to convince its audience that it is situated in the same world as them. Goffman's understanding of sporting contests as performances, detailing "distinctions among performances [referring] to the official face of activity" as opposed to "its underlying character and intent" (ibid, 126) helps us rationalise this incongruence, as he explains that "the whole affair depends upon the contestants acting as if the score outcome itself is what drives them", using the examples of "league rankings, personal performance records, and prize money" (ibid, p 125) to prove that a sporting occasion exists for something more than audience approval. Professional wrestling uses these "non-performance features", usually streamlined in the form of a championship belt, and uses them as a keying to further a melodramatic narrative, which is supported by a



performance of belief in the weight of these 'non-performance features', creating the baseline motivation for the kayfabe lamination.

Goffman argues further that a theatrical audience possesses “the very remarkable capacity... to engross themselves in a transcription that departs radically and systematically from an imaginable original” (Goffman, 1986, p 145), and in the peculiar case of professional wrestling, this capacity presents itself through a performance of belief, explicitly invited by the dramaturgy within the systematic narrative quality of the worked match. Performance of belief can be further understood through analysis of it in other forms of media. Jane McGonigal’s essay *‘A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play’* expands on the audience’s role in participating in such a medium that blurs the lines between the generic dichotomy of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ by responding to an academic moral panic surrounding immersive gaming, a style of video games under the umbrella term of ‘pervasive play’, immersive gaming defined by McGonigal as:

“...a form of pervasive play distinguished by the added element of their (somewhat infamous) ‘This is not a game’ rhetoric. They do everything in their power to erase game boundaries – physical, temporal and social — and to obscure the metacommunications that might otherwise announce, ‘This is play’” (McGonigal, p 2, 2003)

If the idea behind the kayfabe lamination is to build a world in which the events, sequences and scenarios that happen in this world are legitimate by virtue of the performance alone, then it could be considered that a vital facet of a successful wrestling event is the immersive quality, even in spite of the unspoken obviousness of the form’s illegitimacy – ‘This is not a game’, applied to professional wrestling, becomes ‘this is not theatre’.

The bulk of McGonigal's essay is centered around an immersive game called 'The Beast', designed by Microsoft to promote the 2001 film *A.I Artificial Intelligence*, in which players were directed through a multitude of decoy websites created by the US film distributors Warner Bros, helping the fictional Jeanine Salla to deduce the truth about the murdered (and equally fictional) Evan Chan. McGonigal speaks to Elan Lee, the lead designer of the web browser-based game in her essay, and recounts that, as the team expected their "provocative" gameplay ideals to be resisted by cynical internet users, "much to their surprise, Lee and his collaborators discovered that the audience had no intention of fighting back. Instead, players embraced the game's "This is not a game" bravado and buttressed it with their own performed belief. When often-sizeable gaps appeared between the game's "big talk" and the realized immersive effects, the audience collaborated in suturing the game world ruptures. In other words, the players actively supported and protected the game's belief in itself" (McGonigal, 2003, p 10) further going on to report that, after a "resourceful" player found more websites related to the game through a simple WHOIS lookup, "The construction of the game world had become visible, but the audience chose to ignore its seams and to indulge in the pleasures of believing in it" (ibid, 11).

The idea that the players choose to dismiss the obviousness of game breaking discoveries that would otherwise break the immersion invested in the game itself, instead transposing such discoveries into the enjoyment that they get from engaging in the game in the first place is clearly a familiar concept within professional wrestling, especially considering Goffman's conventions that outline the presence of a theatrical framing. Examples of 'game breaking discoveries' include sequences of moves in which cooperation is clearly visible such as the Irish whip ('whipping' the opponent into the ropes or turnbuckle), a referee prematurely counting a pinfall scripted to further the dramatic tension instead of conclude the contest (the pinned wrestler visibly kicking out as the bell is rung), and the reporting of two on-screen rivals engaged in friendly communications, in contradiction to the presented

narrative. Dramaturgical respect can only protect the kayfabe lamination to a certain extent however, and the unavoidable physical labour involved in presenting a professional wrestling contest can lead to 'botched' sequences that disrupt the conveyed logic of kayfabe, with reactions from audience members historically ranging from respectful ignorance, to open acknowledgement, "you fucked up!" being a popular chant amongst rowdier crowds.

Further analysis of the actor-spectator relationships focussing on physical labour comes from Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, in an essay that analyses the modern wrestling industry through a lens rife with Marxist sensibilities. Chow and Laine draw parallels between the validation of the crowd's response and what it means for the wrestler in the workplace structure:

"The cheers of the crowd, however, are only part of an economy of performance that includes affirmation in the form of remuneration" (Chow & Laine, 2014, p 44).

Referencing Karl Marx's understanding of the singer being hired by someone to help sustain their own capital being a productive worker, they deduce that:

"wrestlers labouring for a promoter are productive insofar as surplus value is created for the promoter through ticket sales. But unlike the singer, in the wrestling event, the physical exertion of the performer is the purpose of the performance, not a by-product" (ibid, p 44),

continuing to state of the fictionalised physicality (what Barthes refers to as the 'diacritic writing'):

"While moves are adapted to be performed (relatively) safely... the physical narrative of the match relies on the wrestlers and their ability to endure painful stunts" (ibid, p 45).

According to Chow and Laine, the performance from the wrestlers relies on the performative direction of the fans. Whilst Barthes only alludes to the audience's willingness to consume, Chow and Laine take the reverse approach as they comment on the audience's active role in directing the performers in the ring, proving the symbiotic relationship between the acknowledgement of wrestling's obvious unreality and the proposed 'reality' of the kayfabe lamination:

"The applause, cheers and chants are not only affirmation of the wrestler's work, but also a demand. The chant of 'Bor-ring!' that spontaneously rises from the stands as the action in the ring slows or becomes repetitive is a demonstration of this demand at work. Indeed, it is not that the audience are actually bored because the chant demonstrates their investment in the performance, thus, affirmation is a kind of labour on the part of the spectators as well. In response to this participation, a 'babyface' hero might accelerate the pace of the match, while a villainous 'heel' might address the crowd with a vulgar quip or gesture" (ibid, p 46).

Whilst Barthes makes the true assessment of a wrestler that "never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him" (Barthes, 1972, p 24), he doesn't address the idea of a sub-standard performer, nor the prominence of the audience's implicitness in the act: is professional wrestling really the same without a crowd? This is something Chow and Laine's essay is explicitly based around:

"Affirmation in wrestling is not only a confirmation of a job well done; it is a demand for more" (Chow & Laine, 2014, p 46).

Dissemination of celebrity through the broadcast key is somewhat reliant on the presence of the crowd - whilst budding wrestlers often train behind closed doors in an effort to hone their craft, the application of their physical and performative knowledge in front of a live crowd is

essential not only to the wrestlers in a training context, but to the bookers of the promotion the wrestler works for; not only does the promoter need an audience to sell to, much in the same way that the wrestler finds out if his performance is as convincing and engaging as it could be, a live audience helps the promoter decide who to book as the victor or the loser, even extending this creative control to who the promoter books at the top of the card. To reiterate, dissemination of the wrestler's celebrity requires the performance of belief by an audience member, as it is used as an indication of the efficiency of the dramaturgy at hand. Clearly, and in line with Litherland's analysis of authenticity within professional wrestling, another vital facet of a successful wrestling event is the spectator's visible appreciation of the physical labour involved in the portrayal of dramaturgical prowess, and in turn, the construction of the fabrication. Chow and Laine explain:

“Kayfabe was originally meant to exclude audiences from this industry secret. However, today fans and audiences take pleasure in active collaboration, not only creating the kayfabe world but also in looking for ways of dissecting it” (Chow & Laine, 2014, p 46).

It has been argued that a botched move, a botched finish to a match or even the sight of hearing the wrestlers communicate with each other can rupture the performative logic of the wrestling world, yet (possibly due to the acceptance of human error in such physically demanding ventures) audiences more often than not are happy to look past this organically and unconsciously, in favour of the illusion and the hope that unreality eventually supersedes reality. In instances of exigent activity such as a 'shoot' injury and in turn, the temporary suspension of the narrative, audiences have historically been very respectful and often applauded a fallen performer as they are carried outside of the performance area, but are ultimately forced to suspend their performance of belief to do this. Chow and Laine's essay references this specific relationship:

“there are moments in the live event when the injury of the wrestler, because of its severity or suddenness or apparent non-theatricality, subverts the narrative frame

and reveals the labour of the wrestling body. In these moments, the substance and meaning of affirmation quickly changes, from appreciation of narrative labour (that is, the ability to simulate violence theatrically), to a celebration of labour as such. The labour of the wrestler is no longer captured by an economy of the theatre, but is excessive to it” (Chow & Laine, 2014, p 45)

What we are discussing here is a behavioural change in key of sorts; the audience’s expression inside the theatrical framing of the kayfabe lamination, keyed back out of the lamination in an automatic (and socially appropriate) manner, the keying external to the kayfabe lamination yet simultaneously patterned on the role of the audience member in the theatrical frame. Considering this, what has hopefully become apparent throughout this thesis is the unavoidable duality of the labour involved in presenting oneself as both a competent ‘wrestler’ that excels in their application of dramaturgy, and a competent athlete willing to put their body on the line for the good of the paying audience, combined with the different ways that the spectator or audience responds to this duality of motivation – this is what forms the work/shoot dichotomy.

Therefore, such analysis implies that the role that the audience takes in upkeeping the theatrical frame of the wrestling event manifests itself two-fold, much like the wrestlers of the closed kayfabe. Offering us a way into analysis of “a highly popular performance practice [that] intersects, exploits, and finally parodies the conventions of both sport and theatre” (Mazer, 1998, p 2), Goffman dictates for audience members a dichotomy of role under the theatrical frame. Firstly, they interact as ‘onlooker’, stating that

“he collaborates in the unreality onstage. He sympathetically and vicariously participates in the unreal world generated by the dramatic interplay of the scripted characters. He gives himself over. He is raised (or lowered) to the cultural level of the

playwright's characters and themes, appreciating allusions for which he doesn't quite have the stomach, varieties in style of life for which he is not quite ready, and repartee which gives to speaking a role he could not quite accept for it were he to find such finery in the real world" (Goffman, 1986, p 130)

Clearly, we have a framework to understand an audience's willing acceptance of the embellishment of theatre, the acceptance from the spectator that the world presented to them is a world worth investing in. Wrestling achieves this mainly through its innate immersion, bolstered by the social event's pervasive play aesthetic and its appeals to the melodramatic mode: the semiotically thorough narrative style of the physical choreography compliments the elaborate characterisation of the performer, and the audience responds in kind, performing appreciation for the sport being foreseen by cheering on the protagonist and vilifying the antagonist through their role of the sporting spectator – 'worked' behaviour. Conversely, Goffman describes the audience's interaction as 'theatregoer':

"He is the one who makes the reservations and pays for the tickets, comes late or on time, and is responsive to the curtain call after the performance. He, too, is the person who takes the intermission break. He has untheatrical activity to sustain; it is real money he must spend and real time he must use up – just as the performer earns real money and adds or detracts from his reputation through each performance. The theatregoer may have little 'real' reason for having come, his motives being ones he would not like to see exposed. The theatregoer is the stage actor's opposite number" (ibid, p 130).

This part of the framework, in its distinction of the 'theatregoer' role set remaining outside of the theatrical framing of the wrestling event, highlights the interactions in which an audience member clearly recognises the guided doing of performance in its occupational context, being able to measure the efficiency in which the performers are able to foster the impression of the wrestling event from their own theatrical expectations, and by appreciating

the physical authenticity of the performance and the potential pitfalls that come with such a sacrifice – ‘shoot’ behaviour.



#### **4.4 Selling the gimmick and 'impression management'**

It is here that I bring you back to Al Snow and his training seminars. Snow tells a story for his students, explaining the importance of "selling the gimmick". The set up for the story involves Snow being invited to his younger brother's wrestling show, with Snow being convinced to go after hearing about an angle involving heel tag team champions and the challengers consisting of the masked wrestler, El Escuterio (sp) and his partner, Dewey Brown. According to Snow, one of the tag champions cut a disparaging promo on Dewey, resulting in Dewey 'shoot' assaulting said champ. Dewey is crudely described by Snow as 'retarded' (one can only assume Snow would mean by this mentally handicapped), but this becomes increasingly relevant to the story as it provides an explanation as to why Dewey is allowed to undermine being booked to lose the match, usually a severe breach of the unwritten rules of professional wrestling and something that is justifiably punished.

The prototypical tag team match follows the same structure as a singles match, with the babyface wrestler starting the match performing an impressive run of offence to crowd approval only to be cut off by the heels, building the heat in the match. The babyface comeback spot, however, involves the babyface being dominated tagging out to their partner, something known as the 'hot tag'. Snow recounts being in the crowd watching the match and, through his impressive understanding of the formulaic nature of grass roots pro wrestling matches, deduces early on that the intended booking of the match involves the heels retaining the championships, with Escuterio taking the pinfall as Dewey is the babyface partner that starts the match. According to Snow, as the heels are initially trying cut Dewey's run of offence off with the heat spot (which would eventually lead to the hot tag to Escuterio), Dewey would tag out, forcing Escuterio into the match early and furthermore forcing the heels to think of ways to keep Dewey in the ring so they could continue the intended booking of the match. Upon Dewey's insistent disregard of the script, the heels

attempt to finish the match early by continually tagging each other in and trying to pin Dewey, but as you can imagine at this point, Dewey kicks out every time, further confusing all of the participants in the match, including the referee. Whilst the performers (bar Dewey) coerce with each other in the effort to keep the match on script without letting the fans know something is amiss (Escuterio allegedly 'alligator arms' Dewey every time he tries to tag back out), crowd engagement seems to rise every time the heels continue their domination of the match. As Snow aptly puts it, "Dewey's starting to get over, because who can't relate to not wanting to lose? He's working the gimmick of the match, he's selling the outcome". Dewey isn't deliberately 'selling' the outcome of course, as he's legitimately trying to avoid the pinfall, as if the predetermined contest was actually real.

At this point, the referee tries (and fails) to fast count Dewey, inadvertently portraying himself on the side of the heels, to legitimate crowd disapproval. Eventually, the heels realise Dewey will never take the pinfall, and decide to get Escuterio in the ring. The heels' initial insistence on following the intended booking by keeping Dewey in the ring instead of letting him tag out turns out to be a wasted effort, as the crowd recognise the 'hot tag' spot when Escuterio tags in, popping the crowd as "they didn't want [Dewey] to lose". Further attempts to finish the match with the heels pinning Escuterio are foiled by Dewey as he repeatedly breaks up the pin, popping the crowd, visibly frustrating the heels, their legitimate reactions inadvertently getting both teams over. The heels decide to revert to their original plan by getting the finish on Dewey as they let Escuterio tag back out of the match, but this only reads to the audience as another 'hot tag' spot, and they pop again. As Dewey "comes in like a house on fire", one of the heels legitimately floors Dewey with a double leg takedown and forces Dewey into a 'shoot' leg lock. In actual, legitimate pain, Dewey crawls over to the bottom rope to force a rope break within the logic and ruling of the wrestling match, and at this point, the crowd reaches fever pitch. By now, they are fully invested in Dewey's plight, helped by the intensity of the promo a week before, cemented by the realistic urgency in Dewey's 'performance'.

Typical wrestling rulings dictate that a wrestler performing a submission has until the count of 5 to break the hold if their opponent reaches the ropes, but an opponent can still be submitted if they tap out before the end of said count; as the heel pleads with the referee to not break the hold (in fear for his own safety), the referee starts to slow count Dewey in the hope that he taps out to the hold. Snow recalls crowd members standing up and hurling abuse at the referee in response, prompting the ref to abandon the count altogether and break up the submission himself. The unanimous encouragement of the crowd wills Dewey back up to his feet, and with his leg clearly out of action, Dewey launches himself onto the opposing heel, and as the heel restrains Dewey from legitimately striking him by rolling backwards and holding Dewey close to him to reduce his reach, he puts himself into a pinning position, forcing the referee to count the pin in Dewey's favour. As you can imagine, the crowd allegedly ate this up. Dewey's inability to discern reality from unreality ended up working in his team's favour, at least in the eyes of a now-adoring crowd. According to Snow, "[Dewey] got over because he believed", further explaining the notion of selling the gimmick by asking his students:

"What did the heels work of the match, only out of necessity, because Dewey wouldn't let them stop? The gimmick of the match, for a shoot, they had to tag and keep to people in the ring all the fucking time, otherwise Dewey was cutting the trail right across the goddamn ring... How much heat did the tag have because all the heels were forced to work as a team to keep the other guy from getting to the other guy to make the tag?" (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016).

Clearly, the moral of Snow's story is that, for an audience to be successfully engaged in the story of a wrestling match, a realistic impression has to be fostered to allow for such empathy; the obtusely recognisable formula for a match does not have to impede on the story, if the characterisation of the performers makes logical sense within the presented rulings of said match.

Goffman's 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a precursory analysis of human interaction that *Frame Analysis* expands on, thrives under the implementation of 'dramaturgy', as Goffman interrogates human behaviour in a vast array of scenarios through the metaphor of the theatre, arguing that humans put on performances for an audience of one/many other human(s) by using our immediate surroundings to our advantage, further perpetuating (or in unsuccessful cases, detracting from) the agenda or impression we wish to promote at any particular time, a series of behaviours that he calls 'impression management'. Goffman states at the start of *Presentation of Self*:

“When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be” (Goffman, 1990, p 28).

Applied to one on one interaction, this merely means that the individual in question is assumed to be speaking and acting truthfully and without prior agenda (awareness of the dramaturgy framework renders this assumption void), however when applied to the upkeep of the kayfabe lamination, Snow's understanding of 'selling the gimmick' (that being selling the consequences of the presented definition of the situation as realistically as possible) correlates perfectly with the 'dramaturgy' that Goffman presents. This would be achieved through careful manipulation of the various facets of the 'front', described by Goffman as “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (ibid, p 32), better understood as the wrestler's gimmick, or the actor's character.

Effective impression management requires the performer(s) to exercise great control of their front in the aptly named front region or 'frontstage' (Goffman, 1990, p 110) - in professional

wrestling; if witnessing the contests live, this is everything beyond the ringside barriers, if witnessing the same contest televised, it is everything that the broadcast displays to the viewer through the keying of the live action into the framing of television – camerawork, backstage segments and commentary included. As it pertains to kayfabe’s relationship with celebrity, the act of impression management is how the many keyings of the kayfabe lamination are produced, and the dissemination of the kayfabe lamination through the documentary and broadcast keys is what monetises the performers dramaturgical labour. Performances of impression management lie anywhere between the poles of ‘sincere’ and ‘cynical’ depending on the motivations for said performance (ibid, p 28) – professional wrestling performances, like most other theatrical performances, lie somewhere closer to the cynical pole as one would assume that most wrestlers don’t take themselves so seriously when performing in tight spandex. What made Dewey’s performance so engaging, however, is the sincerity in which he wrestled with; Dewey genuinely believed he needed to win that match for his team, and it is the kind of sincerity in his performance in which the respect of the kayfabe lamination is built from, for both players and observers. Understanding this dichotomy also explains Bret Hart’s distaste in his celebrity being exploited on such a public scale, often called a ‘mark’ for himself, Hart merely performed with the utmost sincerity at all times, resulting in less of a separation between gimmick and person than the observer would normally expect in today’s ‘open’ kayfabe.

Considering the collusively produced nature of the dramatic action at hand, one would think a professional wrestler has greater control of their ‘front’ as opposed to the individual in everyday life, but the individual in everyday life just so happens to be the wrestling spectator, and must exercise his role of spectator through their own process of impression management. Parallel to the segregation of frontstage and backstage areas comes the clear segregation of two (or more) teams within social establishments, with each team displaying an aspect of their collective definition of the situation within their own individual

performances; the theatrical framing of professional wrestling, containing both the wrestlers and the audience in the fabrication, provides the 'definition of the situation' with the many keyings within the kayfabe lamination. Goffman states:

“since each team will be playing through its routine for the other, one may speak of dramatic interaction, not dramatic action, and we can see this interaction not as a medley of as many voices as there are participants but rather as a kind of dialogue and interplay between two teams” (Goffman, 1990, p 96).

Such a definition of team 'interplay' perfectly describes the relationship between wrestlers and the wrestling spectator, as audience response, a keying in itself, is directly instigated by the dramatic action displayed within the ring (or vice versa if using a Marxist lens). Positive social interactions involve performers (or teams of performers) displaying behaviours expected of their status within the social setting, and the achievement of this results in the state of 'idealisation', described by Goffman as so:

“...when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole” (ibid, p 45)

Goffman states of the accredited social expectations of a 'performance' that it may be:

“...the arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behaviour, by persons in an 'audience' role”,

further stating of the individuals in the 'audience' role that they have:

“...neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage, although it may express appreciation throughout in a manner that can be treated as not occurring by the beings in which the stage performers present on stage” (ibid, p 125).

Professional wrestling, distinct in its theatrical simulation of the sporting contest as opposed to the 'purity' of the traditional dramatic scripting, follows part of this idealisation through the assumption that "no individual will be allowed to join both team and audience" (Goffman, 1990, p 97). However, considering our analysis of the audience's role in directing wrestling matches and the general booking of the promotion, we can now understand an audience's performance of belief as an act of impression management within itself, performing the 'role' of the sporting spectator, a role that has inherently different idealised expectations, including the acknowledgement of appreciation by the performer, the 'sporting' celebrity. Goffman states of the fronts of similar social setups that:

"However specialized and unique a routine is, its social front, with certain exceptions, will tend to claim facts that can be equally claimed and asserted of other, somewhat different, routines... Observers then need only be familiar with a small and hence manageable vocabulary of fronts, and know how to respond to them" (ibid, p 36).

The routine in question here is professional wrestling, a social front that claims strips of activity from both the contest and make-believe keys, therefore requiring a spectator performance that is 'in key' with both social fronts. Since the contests are fabricated in such a way to invite performances of belief to manifest through the ubiquitous narrative pacing of the bout, a cultured professional wrestling spectator often knows exactly when to perform and exactly how to do so in order to effectively sustain the presented narrative of the kayfabe lamination at that point in time. With this in mind, we now know that the keyings of the sporting environment indicates to the spectator the freedom of expression in general, and the keying of moral ideologies through the sign vehicles of the wrestlers indicates which response is appropriate for that specific performance. To manipulate one's behaviour through the process of impression management 'in key' with the many theatrical keyings of professional wrestling, is what it means for players and observers alike to act 'in kayfabe'.

## Conclusion

To summarise, professional wrestling performers are judged on their intuition surrounding the performance of an ostensibly legitimate 'professional wrestling' bout, presenting signs relating to ideologies and moral attitudes through their behaviour 'in' kayfabe. These keyings are ubiquitous enough to be fluently consumed by an audience that respond to both the dramaturgical embellishments of the theatrical frame and the authenticity behind the physical labours of the work. This cooperation results in the simulation of sporting celebrity otherwise referred to as the kayfabe lamination – a hyperreal framing device where cooperation from the audience is required for the inner logic of the unreality to be upheld. The intricacies of this theatrical setup lie in the melding of typical sporting and theatrical conventions, and the conventions of immersive play, allowing for the seamless transitioning of strips of activity into the realm of the theatrical framing, generating the simulation of sporting celebrity the lamination pertains to through the dissemination of professional wrestling activity in the broadcast key. Such an intricately built construction has been historically effective thanks to appeals to audience's 'melodramatic imagination', as wrestling storylines have always relied on the dominant culture's moral attitudes, therefore alleviating the common man's insecurities by reinforcing the melodramatic mode of the public psyche, a model of thought and interaction strengthened by a recent sociological movement towards appeals to emotion at the behest of the objective truth. In the transformation of the kayfabe lamination from 'closed' to 'open', the mere admission of the predetermined nature of professional wrestling has finally allowed for the 'post truth condition' to fully permeate the genre, resulting in a type of theatrical framing that, in its infinite malleability, "rather than simply reflecting and reinforcing moral clichés... puts contradictory ideas into play, as with its audience it replays, reconfigures and celebrates a range of performative possibilities" (Mazer, 1998, p 2).



An approach like the one I have taken in this thesis may prove productive when attempting to measure the purity or the truth of a given event across society. For instance, it is not a stretch to assume that celebrity persona is constructed in a similar environment to the professional wrestling gimmick:

“Professional wrestling’s embellished and intensified characters are no more or less ‘constructed’ than other celebrities... at its broadest, film and stage stardom has traditionally relied heavily on a ‘duality of image’, fuelled by the promotion of a screen actor’s public persona and the circulation of information about their ‘private’ life...”  
(Litherland, 2018, p 136)

It may also be argued that Goffman’s work on keying and impression management, and the pervasive nature of kayfabe itself, could also be applied on a global scale. Nick Rogers explains the immersion of appeals to national ‘popular’ belief:

“The aesthetic of World Wrestling Entertainment seems to be spreading from the ring to the world stage. Ask an average Trump supporter whether he or she thinks the president actually plans to build a giant wall and have Mexico pay for it, and you might get an answer that boils down to, ‘I don’t think so, but I *believe* so’. That’s kayfabe” (Rogers, 2017).

Whilst this may somewhat pertain to the vast applicability of Goffman’s sociological work on the human experience, the conceptualisation of kayfabe as a hyperreal framing device relates perfectly back to the post truth continuum that Edward Dean has aptly described, and it could very well be considered that professional wrestling, instead of serving as an enduring possible for just sporting activity, serves as a stark reminder of the untruths of a postmodern world that rewards said deception, in which cultures use kayfabe to mythologise their heroes and demonise their villains, all in the effort to occupy the minds of the culture’s inhabitants and distract them from information that may break the façade of the fabrication.

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