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## A Community of Smarks: Professional Wrestling and the Changing Relationship between Textual Producers and Consumers

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A COMMUNITY OF SMARKS: PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AND THE  
CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXTUAL PRODUCERS AND  
CONSUMERS

by

SHANE TOEPFER

Under the Direction of Ted Friedman

ABSTRACT

This analysis of the professional wrestling genre attempts to understand the complex reading practices employed by wrestling's fan community. I argue that wrestling fans consume these texts in the context of both the official narratives of media producers and the meta-narratives that exist independently of the official texts. In addition, I argue that wrestling fans display characteristics normally reserved for traditional media producers, collaborating with those producers over the direction of the official narratives. This process of collaboration is indicative of the blurring of the boundaries between textual producers and consumers and necessitates a theoretical conception of the audience that accounts for these unique fan practices. I have called this audience conception the productive audience model.

INDEX WORDS: Productive audience, Professional wrestling, Official narratives, Meta-narratives, Fan community, Audience, Smark

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by

SHANE TOEPFER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

July 26

2006

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Shane Matthew Toepfer  
2006

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Finally, I would like to thank my fellow fans of professional wrestling. My hope is that this project helps identify the unique and complex ways that wrestling audiences interact with the object of their fandom.

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## Chapter One

### **A Community of Smarks: Professional Wrestling and the Changing Relationship Between Textual Producers and Consumers**

#### **A Personal Introduction**

I am a fan of professional wrestling. This self-disclosure is meant neither to sabotage the critical analysis that follows nor to attempt to validate the genre. Instead, my experience as a fan of professional wrestling affords me insights into a genre and fan community that are often objects of substantial derision. Many of my own friends and family cannot help but view my fandom of this maligned genre as a deficiency in my personality, offering comments such as, “That stuff is only interesting to children and rednecks” and “You do realize that wrestling is fake”. These comments are no strangers to fans of professional wrestling, as there seems to be a tremendous need for fans of this genre to justify their fandom to those who “don’t get it”. These individual utterances of disdain for professional wrestling and its fan community are indicative of the contempt mainstream society holds against both the genre and its fans. Professional wrestler-turned-author Mick Foley (1999) expertly sums up this consensus view of professional wrestling in his autobiography, *Have a Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*. Recounting his experience in a hospital in Germany following the loss of his ear in a wrestling match, Foley writes:

“Lying in a hospital bed in Munich, Germany-seeing my ear being thrown into a garbage can-not being able to take it on the trip back because I didn’t know the German word for formaldehyde. And having a nurse walk into my room, looking at the piece of my body that’s lying at the bottom of the garbage, and saying, ‘Es ist alles schauspiel,’ which means ‘It’s all a big joke!’...So if they show that much respect for other patients, what made me any different? Because I was a wrestler. And professional wrestling will never be respected, no matter how many teeth I lose, no matter how many ears I lose, no matter how many brain cells have to die”(347).

As I said, this analysis is not meant as a blanket defense of professional wrestling.

There are many facets of the genre that deserve criticism. The portrayal of women in professional wrestling texts is often misogynist, as male wrestlers often compete in matches in order to win the affection or services of their female counterparts. These women are reduced to objects in wrestling’s diegesis, leaving little room for female fans to identify with powerful depictions of empowered women. In addition, the reliance on chemically enhanced bodies, in both male and female wrestlers, often poses severe health risks for the performers, as the premature death rates for professional wrestlers far exceeds the average in more traditional sports such as football or baseball (Meltzer, 2006). These examples demonstrate that there are many facets of the genre that are rightfully criticized in the discourses surrounding professional wrestling. However, these criticisms consistently omit any analysis of genre’s specific conventions and what these conventions indicate about wrestling’s fan community. What is it about professional wrestling that encourages such a loyal fan community? And why do these fans overlook certain elements of the genre that they find objectionable? Through an analysis of the genre’s unique signifying processes and generic conventions, this analysis will illuminate a dynamic relationship between textual producers and consumers that necessitates the development of a new theoretical model for examining audiences, what I will call the

“productive” audience model. It will become apparent through this analysis that the genre of professional wrestling, and its vocal and productive fan community, is much more complex than previously imagined.

### **Chapter Outline**

This analysis will begin by examining the theoretical models posed by communication scholars conceptualizing the audience. These models include envisioning the audience as passive, active, and creative. After reviewing the relevant literature of these audience models, I will argue that a fourth conception of the audience, the productive audience model, accounts for the potential of audiences to impact the official narratives of media producers and perform in a similar capacity to textual producers. The productive audience model complements the active and creative audience models by positioning audiences as capable of resisting the intended meanings of official textual producers and serving as creators themselves of media texts. This blurring of the boundaries between textual producers and consumers will be evaluated in relation the reading practices of professional wrestling’s fan community.

In addition, I will explore the relevant literature of the professional wrestling genre in order to posit that fans of the genre read both the official narratives of textual producers as well as meta-narratives that exist independently of these texts. The official and meta-narratives of professional wrestling serve to contextualize the wrestling matches and the particular characters in wrestling’s diegesis. Any analysis of the genre must account for both of these narrative strands, as the reading practices of wrestling’s

fan community is often underestimated in previous literature. I will argue that this combination of official and meta-narratives of professional wrestling serves as the foundation in which fans evaluate wrestling texts, indicating their level of satisfaction with the practices of the official media producers. If wrestling fans feel that their needs and demands are not sufficiently met in the official narratives, the productive audience model allows for the possibility of the audience to seize control of the official narrative and nudge textual producers in a direction more to their liking.

Chapter two will focus on the semiotics of professional wrestling. This analysis will explore both the genre's semantics and syntax by reexamining and updating the scholarly work performed by Roland Barthes (1957) and Henry Jenkins (1997) on the genre. I will argue that this genre borrows from the conventions of both sport and melodrama, but also has unique signifying processes that must be understood in relation to the wrestling genre specifically. Focusing on the signifying processes of one wrestling match held in January of 2000 between the wrestling performers Triple H and Cactus Jack, this analysis will illuminate the narrative structure of professional wrestling matches as well as the manner in which specific wrestling maneuvers signify certain meanings to wrestling audiences. This particular match was chosen due to the recognition among professional wrestling's fan community of this match's success in conveying the narrative it was designed to communicate. In addition, this match is recognized as being immensely important to the character of Triple H, who will be examined in detail in the chapter. This match also serves as an example of how the conventions of the genre of professional wrestling have changed in the years since the

work of Barthes (1957) and Jenkins (1997), pointing to the need to place the genre in its historical context.

The character of Triple H is important in that there are added levels of significations associated with his character due to his position within the company of WWE. In the official narratives of professional wrestling texts, the character of Triple H plays a heel, or villain, and his actions are designed to elicit a negative response from wrestling audiences. However, what is significant about this character is that in the world outside of the diegetic universe of professional wrestling, he is married to Stephanie McMahon, the daughter of the majority owner of WWE, Vince McMahon. The marriage of Triple H, who is played by a man named Paul Levesque, to Stephanie McMahon is not included in the diegetic universe of WWE, as it is never acknowledged in the official narratives. However, this information is widely reported and discussed on the Internet among members of the professional wrestling fan community, adding deeper significations to all of the actions of the character Triple H. Wrestling fans often dismiss the Triple H character as a member of management who positions himself favorably at the expense of more deserving performers. Smarks actually revile Triple H more for his backstage power than for any villainous acts he commits in the official narratives of professional wrestling texts. The discourses surrounding the Triple H character demonstrate that there are meta-narratives hidden beneath the surface in professional wrestling texts, and it is these narratives that captivate the fans of the genre in the postmodern age.

The rise in popularity of professional wrestling coincides with the rise of the Internet in American culture. The Internet provides the space for fans to follow the

industry practices of rival wrestling companies, as well as solidify the strength of fan communities due to the elimination of temporal and geographic boundaries. These fan discourses on the Internet revolve around both the official narratives that appear in professional wrestling texts and the meta-narratives outside of the diegetic universe of the televised texts. Through this analysis of the genre of professional wrestling's historical context, as well as the industrial practices that defined the genre during its surge in popularity in the 1990s, the role of fans becomes much more dynamic than at any other point in the genre's history. Once this critical analysis has ascertained how the genre's signifying processes have changed in the years since the work of Barthes (1957) and Jenkins (1997), and the wrestling industry has been placed in its historical and industrial context, the focus will shift to what Altman calls audience pragmatics (1999).

Chapter three expands on the analysis of the Triple H character by exploring how fan cultures can take a more active role and impact the creation of the official televised narratives in professional wrestling. This process serves as evidence for a new theoretical model of audiences, what I have called the productive audience model. Focusing on the character of Randy Orton, this analysis will examine how both the official narratives as well as the meta-narratives are debated and reconfigured by the fan community of the genre. This section will explore the ways in which the character of Randy Orton was rejected by wrestling audiences, even though the WWE decided he would be the future face of the company and pushed as its biggest star. The failure of Orton's star image to connect with wrestling audiences demonstrates a shift in the power relations between textual producers and consumers, in that fan discourses over the Internet played a crucial role in the WWE abandoning their plans for the Orton character. Through the

examination of the character of Randy Orton over the course of one year in both the official narratives and the meta-narratives, this analysis will demonstrate how audiences have entered into a position of power comparable to the positions of actual textual producers.

This critical analysis will conclude with a discussion of what this case study means in the larger picture of communication scholarship. Audiences now play a crucial role in the creation of media texts and must be examined in this context. Professional wrestling serves as the perfect vehicle for examining this complex relationship due to its unique generic conventions and the vocal fan culture that has carved out space on the Internet. This analysis will provide a model that transcends the genre of professional wrestling in that it will mark a trend of audience participation across all media texts, highlighting the interactive nature of textual production that has been made available by new media technologies such as the Internet. It is the goal of this analysis to provide a framework for examining media texts in a manner similar to the ways that Altman (1999) examines film genres, paying equal attention to audience pragmatics as well as the more traditional examination of textual semantics and syntax.

To this point I have alluded to the audience of professional wrestling as active participants in the generation of the official texts as well as readers of both official and meta-narratives. However, the audience of professional wrestling is not easily quantified into one monolithic whole. It is not my intention to presume that the audience of professional wrestling is functions as one, voicing their unanimous approval or displeasure at live events or over the Internet. The target audience for professional wrestling is males in their late teens and early twenties, but that by no means disqualifies

the existence of an audience that is outside of those parameters. There are women who are fans of the genre, as well as kids and older adults. In addition, the audience of professional wrestling is made up of both members of the Internet Wrestling Community, or “IWC”, and casual observers who only tune in occasionally. The only way to get a handle on the heterogeneity of the audience of professional wrestling is through the employment of an ethnographic methodology, which will be addressed in future work in this field.

This critical analysis will serve as the foundation of a much larger project. As mentioned previously, I will focus on the textual signifying processes as well as fan discourses on the Internet, but I will not include any components of ethnography. This ethnographic methodology will be employed in future research and positioned alongside the critical analysis performed in this study to build on the foundation established with this study. Future research will include in-depth interviews with actual wrestling fans about their interaction with wrestling texts. Questions will include gauging their levels of satisfaction with the official televised texts, their level of involvement in the IWC, their personal experiences with the genre over the years, and their awareness and engagement with the meta-narratives identified in this study. In addition, this data will be supplemented by participant observations, in which I will personally travel to the sites of professional wrestling events in order to observe the attitudes and behaviors of wrestling fans. I would also like to schedule interviews with actual textual producers, or people who work in the wrestling business, in order to collect data about their perspective of how the Internet and the IWC has changed their production processes. The data collected in these studies will then be positioned alongside the critical analysis performed here in



order to ascertain a comprehensive analysis of the fan community of professional wrestling and its changing relationship with the producers of these texts.

### **Research Methodology**

This study will examine the phenomenon of fan participation in the creation of official narratives in media texts. Through a critical analysis of the genre of professional wrestling, it becomes apparent that fans of this genre are active participants in the decisions made in the official narratives that appear on television, including who should or should not be featured in the programs, the roles these characters should play in the text (hero or villain), and the determinant as to which storylines are working or not. This critical analysis will demonstrate how professional wrestling reflects the changing relationship between textual producers and consumers by expanding on the literature previously compiled on the genre and positioning these changes in their historical context. New media technologies such as the Internet have closed the gap between textual producers and consumers, and the prevalence of an online fan culture such as the one devoted to professional wrestling (referred to previously as the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community) provides a forum to track the ways in which fans of the genre both propagate meta-narratives and interact with the official texts.

The materials that will comprise the critical analysis of this study include the media texts in the genre of professional wrestling. This genre is unique in that it explicitly blends the conventions of sports programming and the seriality of traditional narratives that appear on television, particularly the conventions of melodrama (Jenkins,

1997). The genre of professional wrestling shares many of the negative connotations associated with melodrama, marking its loyal fan community as defenders of a denigrated genre. In order to understand the conventions of professional wrestling, and how it borrows from sports and melodrama, this critical analysis will examine both the similarities and the differences between this genre and the genres that it borrows from. In order to achieve this comprehensive analysis of the wrestling genre, it is necessary to perform a semiotic analysis of professional wrestling. Borrowing from the framework established by theorists such as Roland Barthes, who examined the genre in its historical and cultural specificity of France in 1957, this semiotic analysis will examine the ways in which the signs in professional wrestling signify to wrestling audiences. This analysis will use the professional wrestling texts to understand how these texts communicate with their loyal fan communities through a detailed, critical analysis of one wrestling match.

This analysis will also examine the narratives that are conveyed in the wrestling texts themselves. The characters of Triple H and Randy Orton respectively serve as perfect examples of connotations being attached to characters that have nothing to do with the official narratives and of fans exerting control over the direction of the official narrative. This analysis will expose the meta-narratives of professional wrestling, demonstrating the intersection of peripheral signifying processes on the diegetic universe of the official narratives. This intersection will highlight the contributions made by fan cultures on media producers.

In addition to using the televised texts, this analysis will necessitate the incorporation of fan discourses on the Internet. The Internet has become the site of much fan discourse about media texts and has allowed for the proliferation of fan communities

through the elimination of hindrances such as geographic space. Websites maintained by fans of a particular genre, rather than the textual producers' official website, serve as a tremendous resource for examining fan discourses. The reason for suspicion of the official websites of media producers is that they often regulate the content on the site in an attempt to maximize profits of the product being produced. Very often any critique or negative reaction posted by fans is removed in order to maintain a positive connotation associated with their commodity. Websites maintained by fans, on the other hand, often provide vehement and detailed dialogue about the merits of the particular text. This critical analysis will examine these fan discourses in relation to the official televised texts in order to illuminate the meta-narratives of professional wrestling.

### **The Creative Audience**

There is a large body of scholarship devoted to examining the complex relationship between audiences and the producers of media texts. Theorists conceive audiences as having varying amounts of power in this relationship, depending on their perspectives. As we shall see in more detail later in this chapter, there have been three generations of scholarship that position the theoretical conception of the audience as having progressively more power in the relationship between textual producers and consumers. These generations of scholarship envision the audience as being passive, active, and creative respectively. However, I am not suggesting that these three generations of media scholarship evolved chronologically. Communication scholars envisioning the audience as active and creative have produced influential work in close

proximity to each other. In addition, although the field of cultural studies generally rejects the model of the passive audience, the model is still employed in the social sciences. Rather than a chronological timeline, the three generations of scholarship refers to the development of three unique critical perspectives of the audience. These three previous generations all conceive of the audience as progressively having a significantly greater role in the production of media texts. As we shall see, this analysis will offer a fourth perspective, which I will call the productive audience, that builds on the theoretical models of audience reception studies that preceded it.

The first generation of communication scholarship examining audiences positioned the audience as passive consumers of media texts. This model for examining audiences is commonly referred to as the “Effects model” and is championed by many social scientists attempting to link media representations of societal ills with any manifestations of those ills in society (Wertham, 1955, Woo & Kim, 2003). Audiences are conceived as being vulnerable entities that passively absorb all messages inscribed in media texts, making them susceptible to brainwashing and desensitization. As we shall see, this model is grossly inadequate for understanding the complex reading processes employed by audiences and is too often used as a tool for censorship and as a regulator of taste.

Many communication scholars recognized the inherent limitations of the Effects model and proposed crucial modifications. Rather than envisioning the audience as passive recipients of mediated messages, scholars such as John Fiske (1989) and David Morley (1992) argue that audiences take a more active role in the ways that media texts are both read and used in the culture. This notion of the active audience positions the

audience as capable of resistance to the messages inscribed in mediated images, increasing the amount of power the audience has in the relationship between media producers and consumers. In addition to audiences resisting some messages inscribed in media texts, the model of the active audience also provides space where the meanings themselves in media texts can be a subject of debate. As we shall see, the theoretical conception of the audience as active also accounts for the sociological and historical context of individual audience members, demonstrating how subjectivity plays a crucial role in the reading processes of audiences.

The third generation of media scholarship on the concept of audiences provides media consumers with an even greater amount of power than the theoretical model of the active audience. Appropriating Michel de Certeau's model of "textual poaching", Henry Jenkins (1992) conceptualizes the audience as being creative participants in the relationship between textual producers and consumers. Jenkins examines the ways in which audiences become creative producers themselves, producing works of fan fiction that extend the narratives created by media producers. This theoretical conception of the audience as creative complicates the relationship between textual producers and consumers accepted previously. Rather than rigid distinctions between textual producers and consumers, the model of the creative audience provides the opportunity for audiences to shift roles with media producers and create media texts themselves.

However, examples of the creative audience functioning as textual producers exist only on the fringes of mainstream culture. Works of fan fiction exist independently of the "official" media producers and "official" narratives of media texts. My term "official media" refers to the texts that are created by and disseminated through traditional media

outlets such as film studios, television stations, and so on. Similarly, official narratives are the stories and images featured in the media texts offered by official media producers. For example, the official narratives of the popular television serial *Lost* are the stories and images that are depicted on network television when the show airs weekly on ABC. Fans of the show may produce works of fiction themselves independent of the televised texts, straying from the narratives that appear in the official text and venturing in new directions. These works of fan fiction, however, exist on the periphery of mainstream culture, failing to reach the vast audience of the official narratives of official media producers. Works of fan fiction lack the access to traditional media outlets available to the official media producers. The official narratives reach millions each week through network television, while works of fan fiction are distributed to much smaller audiences at fan conventions and over the Internet.

The creative audience model is crucial to this analysis because it identifies the possibility for audiences to participate in the production of media texts. Rather than examining fan-created texts that exist solely on the periphery, this analysis will examine the ways in which audiences exert influence over the official media producers themselves. This distinct difference between the peripheral texts of the creative audience and the official texts of media producers necessitates a fourth theoretical model of the audience, what I will call the productive audience. The model of the productive audience envisions the audience as having more power than any of the theoretical models developed in the three previous generations of academic scholarship on audience reception practices. In this model, the audience serves as collaborators with official

media producers, working to shape the narratives of the media texts according to their own expectations and desires.

The relationship between textual producers and the productive audience is not without its difficulties, however. I am not suggesting that audiences directly dictate the content of media texts to textual producers, as this would be simplifying an extraordinarily complex relationship. Instead, this model acknowledges the space where contemporary audiences collaborate with media producers on the content of the official texts. The theoretical conception of the audience as productive recognizes the blurred boundaries between textual producers and consumers, with each side of the relationship displaying characteristics normally associated with the other. The model of the productive audience is also not intended to nullify the academic scholarship positioning the audience as active or creative. Rather, the model of the productive audience is complementary to the previous conceptions of audiences as being active and creative, but accounting for a significantly smaller feedback circuit between textual producers and consumers with less distinction between their respective roles in the circuit.

Of course, audiences have always maintained a relationship with media producers. The notion of a feedback circuit mentioned above alludes to the process of audiences communicating their expectations and desires to media producers, who in turn attempt to meet those demands. The process of discovering audience demands and providing media texts that meet those demands is at the heart of the media industry. In addition, audiences have always had some influence on the production of media texts. When a new television program becomes a hit with audiences, media producers scramble to produce similar programs in an attempt to give the audience what they want, which

will in turn make the media producers more money. Conversely, when a television text fails to garner high ratings or a film's monetary earnings come in below expectations, these texts are often viewed by the media industry as rejected by the audience. This system positions audience exposure to media texts as a positive interaction. However, audiences often continue consuming media texts while simultaneously critiquing the value or quality of these texts. The productive audience model accounts for the complex processes of audience interaction with media texts while simultaneously blurring the distinction between textual producers and consumers.

Some communication scholars would argue that the productive audience model is no different than standard consumption models that position the audience as active contributors in a feedback circuit with textual producers. As we shall see, the live audience of professional wrestling, as well as other genres, provides a unique opportunity for audiences to become participants in the staging of the texts themselves. The live nature of professional wrestling offers significant evidence of audiences exerting immediate control over the production of these texts. Future research could explore how media texts lacking the presence of a live audience display similar opportunities for audiences to blur the boundaries between textual producers and consumers.

Another potential critique of this model of the productive audience is that it underestimates the process of recuperation by official media producers. Many scholars could point to the commodification of the audience by official media producers, appropriating the work audiences into the official narratives. This process happens with great frequency in professional wrestling, as examples of audiences asserting control becomes new selling points for company products. However, it is impossible for any



official media producer to control every aspect of the reading processes of audiences. For example, websites devoted to professional wrestling such as [www.411wrestling.com](http://www.411wrestling.com) and [www.pwtorch.com](http://www.pwtorch.com) are independently owned by wrestling fans and maintain discourses about professional wrestling free from the control of official media producers. The Internet has significantly shortened the feedback circuit between producers and consumers, providing space for audiences to engage both media texts and official media producers in unprecedented ways. This analysis will examine how the discourses of professional wrestling on the Internet have demonstrated a need to create a new model of audience reception practices.

### **Bridging Audience Studies and Genre Studies – Altman’s “Pragmatics”**

This analysis will adopt the framework first proposed to study film genres by Rick Altman (1999). Altman argues that the phenomenon of genre in media texts must be examined through three lenses: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. The bulk of Altman’s *Film/Genre* concentrates on these first two categories, examining genre’s structural building blocks, or semantics, and the arrangement of these building blocks within a genre, or syntax. However, near the end of his analysis, Altman argues that this approach is not sufficient because it fails to account for how audiences actually use genre in the culture. He calls this third approach pragmatics (1999). It is this, Altman’s three-part approach, which accounts for both the unique formal components of media texts and the audience’s usages of those texts, that illuminates the changing relationship between textual producers and consumers.

Unfortunately, Altman's comprehensive framework only appears as an addendum to his examination of the semantics and syntax of film genres, illuminating the shortcomings of much scholarly discourse on this phenomenon. This framework, however, is useful for the purposes of this analysis in that it accounts for the role of audiences in the creation and propagation of generic conventions. This analysis will examine the semantics and syntax of the genre of professional wrestling, as well as placing the genre in its historical specificity, in order to discern how the fans of this genre have taken a more active role in the creation of the texts themselves. This focus on the audience as participants in the creation of generic narratives draws on the pragmatic component of Altman's critical framework.

The genre of professional wrestling serves as the perfect case study for examining the changing relationship between textual producers and consumers due to both its unique generic conventions and its devoted and vociferous fan community. Through a critical analysis of the generic conventions of professional wrestling, we will see that there are two distinct sets of narratives that are read by fans of the genre. The first set of narratives, which I have called official narratives, are directly presented in the televised texts. These narratives take place within the diegetic world of the professional wrestling texts, unfolding live in the arena and on television sets across the country whenever wrestling events are staged. An example of an official narrative would be when Triple H and Randy Orton, two wrestling characters who will be examined in great detail in this thesis, engage in a wrestling match in an arena. The scripted competition between these characters is the fundamental feature of professional wrestling, as wrestlers battle with each other to see who is the better man. In addition, the reasons for these two performers

to desire to defeat their opponent would also be included in the official narrative. As we will see, Triple H turned on his protégé, Randy Orton, setting in motion a narrative where Orton wanted revenge against the nefarious Triple H. This storyline serves as the context of the wrestling match, providing motivation for the characters in the official narratives of professional wrestling.

However, there is also a second set of narratives that are exposed and circulated amongst the members of the genre's fan community. These narratives, which I will call "meta-narratives," are never directly manifested in the texts themselves. Instead, these narratives are disseminated over the Internet and contribute to the overall signification process of professional wrestling texts. Fans engage these meta-narratives, which take place outside of the realm of the televised texts, in conjunction with the official narratives of the televised texts. Some examples of meta-narratives include stories of what wrestlers are like backstage, how much power a wrestler wields over the direction of his or her character, and how a particular wrestler attained his or her status within a wrestling company. As we shall see, the meta-narratives surrounding the characters of Triple H and Randy Orton greatly impact the ways in which audiences view each performer. Rather than relying solely on the signifying processes of the official narratives, audiences contextualize wrestling texts within the meta-narratives that add another level of signs to each character. In addition, the combination of the signifying practices of both the official and meta-narratives provides a space where audiences can exert control over the direction of the televised texts, complicating the distinctions between textual producers and consumers.

I have selected the term meta-narratives to describe the narratives that take place outside of the diegetic universe of professional wrestling, even though the term has pejorative connotations attached to it in postmodern theory. There is a significant difference between the meta-narratives I am describing and the metanarratives derided by postmodern theorists, however. In postmodern theory, a metanarrative is a grand, all-encompassing story that suggests the existence of a universal truth. One of the fundamental features of postmodernity is the rejection of these metanarratives due to the inability of metanarratives to adequately account for the heterogeneity of the human experience. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) argues that metanarratives are often used as tools to legitimize a certain version of “the truth” in order to provide credibility to a certain political position. Postmodernity has exposed the inherent limitations of metanarratives by focusing on the local contexts of individuals over the existence of one master narrative.

However, I am employing the term meta-narratives (with a dash) rather than metanarratives to describe the existence of narratives outside of the diegetic universe of a particular media text which supplement and comment upon the text. The existence of meta-narratives is often cited in the work of communication scholars who examine the world of games in the culture. For example, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that players of many live-action-role-playing-games, or LARPG, blur the lines between the game’s diegetic universe and the real world the players inhabit. In this example, the players layer the game onto the real world through role-playing, creating a narrative that transcends the boundaries of the traditional universe of media text. There is no universal narrative involved in meta-narratives, but rather information that impacts particular texts

outside of the text's boundaries. The gamers in this example incorporated the game's rules into their everyday lives. Similarly, the meta-narratives of professional wrestling serve as information that transcends the signifying processes of the texts themselves. These meta-narratives refer to the existence of professional wrestlers outside of their televised characters, focusing more on the human being behind the mediated image. However, these meta-narratives, as we shall see, greatly impact the reading processes of wrestling's fan community.

### **Professional Wrestlers as Stars**

The Internet provides fans and fan communities with the means to go deeper into the texts that characterize their fandom. This analysis will demonstrate how this is accomplished in professional wrestling texts, as fans use the Internet to talk about not just the televised manifestations of professional wrestling but also the non-televised, backstage news stories, or meta-narratives, that serve as the context in which professional wrestling fans read wrestling texts. This theoretical distinction is greatly influenced by the field of star studies, and in particular the work of Richard Dyer. Dyer (1979), in his book *Stars*, examines the phenomenon of stardom in Hollywood and American culture and concludes that there is a desire by fans to get to know the "real" personality behind the star image. It is this desire to go beyond the mediated images and get to the real aspect of a personality that characterizes the fascination with Hollywood celebrities in this culture (Dyer, 1979). However, Dyer maintains that the publicity and promotion components of the star system often manufacture meta-narratives that are designed to

support the star image in media texts. What is presented is the illusion of something real, distorting the distinction between star image and human being. This phenomenon is equally apparent in the relationship between wrestling producers and fans in that fans exhibit a need to get beyond the mediated images and get to something deeper, something real. The Internet has provided the means for more information to be dispensed to more people, enhancing the access to the illusion of a real story behind the mediated images.

This conception of a real story existing behind the mediated images of stars refers to the narratives that circulate outside of the official texts. Discourses emerge on the Internet about what a particular star is like when he is not in front of a camera. It is true that very often these stories are narratives constructed by the official media producers. However, this analysis will demonstrate that some of these stories are produced independently of official media producers and can provide a glimpse of the human being behind the star image. Behind the media produced star image and official narratives lies a hidden story, a meta-narrative that fascinates audiences and adds to the signifying processes of both stars and generic texts. Audiences read these texts and star images within the context of the meta-narratives that surround them, adding levels of connotations that impact the reading of the official narratives. Although Dyer examined the phenomenon of stars prior to the rise of the Internet in popular culture, his analysis provides a foundation for examining the dynamic relationship between fans and textual producers. Through applying the framework established by Altman, the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, this analysis will demonstrate that the meta-narratives that surround media texts significantly alter the official narratives' signifying

processes and provide fans the ability to participate in the production of official narratives.

### **The Genre of Professional Wrestling**

Perhaps the most controversial convention of the genre of professional wrestling is the fact that professional wrestling is scripted entertainment. As we have seen, critics of professional wrestling often “inform” fans that wrestling is “fake” in an attempt to dissuade their allegiance to the genre. This dismissal of wrestling as fake is an accurate description of some of the components of the genre, but not a fair characterization of the genre as a whole. Professional wrestling is scripted, meaning that the outcomes of all professional wrestling matches are predetermined. The wrestlers are informed prior to their matches whether they will win or lose on that particular night. The scripted nature of professional wrestling matches ensures the creation of storylines within the diegetic world of professional wrestling, what I previously called official narratives. These official narratives provide the context for individual wrestling matches in the genre’s diegesis. But, as we shall see there is more to wrestling than the script.

The characters in professional wrestling texts are usually categorized into two camps, babyfaces and heels. These terms are wrestling jargon for heroes and villains, respectively. The official narratives are structured so that the babyfaces, or heroes, are faced with seemingly insurmountable odds and must overcome the diabolical actions of their evil opponents. On the other hand, the heels are the villains who will resort to using any actions deemed necessary in order to win their matches. As we shall see, the

scholarship on professional wrestling has linked this struggle between babyfaces and heels to concepts such as justice and suffering (Barthes, 1957). According to Barthes, professional wrestling is an exaggerated spectacle in order to convey to the audience these concepts of justice and suffering, making clear that each character metaphorically embodies either good or evil. The babyface must undergo suffering in his struggle with evil, making his eventual triumph more resounding when it occurs. This triumph subsequently restores the social order, alluding to the concept of justice by punishing those who threaten the rules of society.

The scripted nature of the professional wrestling genre ensures that this struggle between good and evil plays out over a structured narrative. For example, a heel may employ an illegal tactic, such as hitting their babyface opponent with an object banned from the context of the wrestling match, in order to “steal” a victory. This disputed outcome leads to the babyface character seeking revenge on a tainted loss, and an official narrative is born. The scripting of the outcome of the first match naturally leads to successive rematches between the characters. In addition, this official narrative will often end with the babyface character successfully vanquishing his nemesis, thus restoring the social order where good triumphs over evil. If this narrative were not constructed in advance, there would be no guarantee that the heel would receive his or her comeuppance at the conclusion of the official narrative, breaking the rules of melodrama.

In addition to scripting the outcomes of the wrestling matches in advance, there is also a fine line between real and fake in the matches themselves. Although the matches are presented in a manner that resembles traditional competitive sports, professional wrestlers are not trying to win their matches. As we have seen, the outcomes are known



in advance and there is no actual competition between the wrestlers in the context of the match. Instead, the wrestlers are attempting to provide the illusion of competition. In order to accomplish this illusion, professional wrestlers must work in conjunction with each other to ensure that the match looks as real as possible and so that no one is seriously injured over the course of the match. Chapter two will examine how this illusion of sport is created and sustained.

The process of creating this illusion of competitive sport is very dangerous to the wrestlers, as one wrong move could have serious repercussions and lead to paralysis or even death. Mick Foley's autobiography provides a detailed account of how wrestling matches are constructed to look real. This source provides many examples of how wrestlers construct their scripted matches to facilitate the suspension of disbelief in the audience, drawing the audience into the drama of the spectacle. This process, however, involves tremendous danger, as wrestling moves where a performer seemingly lands on his or her head and neck require perfect timing to avoid catastrophe. In addition to examining how wrestling matches are constructed, it is important to examine professional wrestling's generic conventions such as how wrestlers use tiny razors on their foreheads in order to draw blood and how naming unique wrestling holds signify a match's potential conclusion. These conventions must be examined in their generic specificity, and this analysis will provide the necessary tools for understanding how wrestling matches are constructed and subsequently read by wrestling fans.

As stated previously, one of the fundamental components of the genre of professional wrestling is the fact that the spectacle is staged in front of a live audience. This feature of professional wrestling marks a significant difference between this genre

and other scripted serials on television. The presence of a live audience in the staging of wrestling texts serves as both a distinctive feature of the genre and as a complication in the relationship between textual producers and consumers. Raymond Williams (1974) presented the influential concept of “flow” when describing the process of consuming television in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Williams argues that rather than breaking television images and texts into discrete units, the entire experience of consuming television must be understood as a complex whole. Rather than watching individual programs on television such as sporting events, drama serials, and news programs, Williams contends that the entire experience is unified by the phenomenon of “watching television”(89). The varying programs are arranged in a specific order, along with sets of commercials, in an attempt to keep the viewer glued to a particular television station. These discrete programs and commercials combine to define the totality of the television viewing experience, and this process is what Williams defines as flow.

Similarly, the live audience of professional wrestling texts is one fundamental feature of the genre, just as commercials are one fundamental component of the overall experience of television viewing. The presence of the live audience contributes to the overall signifying processes of the experience of watching wrestling texts, and it is impossible to separate the presence of the live audience from the overall presentation of wrestling texts. Professional wrestling, in a similar manner to television viewing, presents a flow of information and images that are inseparable from the overall experience, and live audiences are a crucial aspect of the genre’s flow. For fans at home watching on television, the presence of the live audience constitutes an important aspect of the overall experience of consuming professional wrestling. And as we shall see,

being present in a live staging of professional wrestling text complicates the boundaries between performer and observer.

Lawrence Levine (1988), in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, chronicles the process by which live audiences blur the boundaries between observer and performer. Levine examines the staging of Shakespearian plays in the United States during the 1800s in front of live theater-going audiences. He states that, “more than an audience; they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their feelings vocally and unmistakable”(Levine, 1988, p. 26). Levine goes on to describe how audiences can impact the staging of the plays themselves, offering an example of audience rejection of a performance of one play in 1856. He states that the audience hurled vegetables at the performers who failed to meet their expectations, culminating with the projection of firecrackers and dead animals onto the stage to the dismay of the unskilled actors. This example is significant in that it demonstrates the ability of the live audience to greatly impact the production of a particular text. This individual performance was drastically altered by the power of the live audience, eventually leading to the cancellation of the performance entirely. This kind of audience participation is a regular feature of professional wrestling matches, although matches are rarely cancelled outright. And beyond the individual match, this fan behavior influences subsequent matches as well, as performers with “heat” gain more air-time in wrestling texts, higher placement in the hierarchy of the company, and greater monetary compensation due to their participation in marquee matches.

Levine also examines the phenomenon of live audiences blurring the lines between performers and observers. Levine presents the example of audience members

rushing the stage in a New York theater in 1832, fully participating in the staging of the play. As opposed to the previous example, the audience members were not expressing their disapproval to the performance, but rather became so involved in the spectacle that they could no longer be held back by the rules of spectatorship. The audience became the performers in this example, manipulating the stage props and conversing with the actors on stage. Examples such as these are fascinating in that the audience directly disrupts the performance, shredding the lines between performer and spectator. However, this analysis will examine how audiences become part of the spectacle without physically invading the boundaries between spectator and performer. Rather than rushing the ring in professional wrestling texts to become part of the spectacle, this analysis will examine how the cheers, jeers, and chants of the audience is intrinsically linked to the spectacle of professional wrestling, and in some instances overwhelms the action in the wrestling ring itself.

### **Marks, Smarts, and Smarks**

The wrestling terms “mark”, “smart”, and “smark”, refer to the various varying characteristics displayed by audiences of professional wrestling. These descriptions of professional wrestling fans also coincide with the changes that have developed in the genre and in the culture. As we shall see, the rise of the Internet and the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community, has had an enormous impact on the ways in which audiences interact with wrestling texts. In addition, these classifications of wrestling fandom demonstrate both the misperception of mainstream culture as to how wrestling fans read

generic texts as well as how theoretical conceptions of the audience fail to comprehensively account for the distinctions between these three classifications.

The term mark has its origins in the traveling carnival, where magicians would baffle audiences with sleight of hand tricks under the umbrella of “magic”(Brosnahan, 2006). Particularly gullible members of the audience were identified by the magicians as marks, or easily fooled members of the audience. The history of professional wrestling has much in common with the traveling carnival, as like the carnival professional wrestling promotions would travel from small town to small town in hopes of luring an audience. The wrestling matches at this time were presented as legitimate competitions, and the goal of wrestling promoters was to attract gullible audiences that could not see past the artifice of the wrestling matches. Thomas Hackett (2006), in *Slaphappy*, provides a detailed account of professional wrestling’s historical context, noting how the intended audience of the genre in its infancy were marks, or people who believed that what they witnessed was real competition. Much of the criticism leveled against professional wrestling fans envisions the fan culture of the genre as a group of marks. When a critic decries the genre as fake in an attempt to enlighten wrestling fans, the assumption is that the fan is unaware of the artifice of the genre.

However, most fans of a certain age do not exhibit the qualities of the mark. While many children have not yet developed the sophistication to see past the artifice of professional wrestling, much of the audience of the genre is aware that professional wrestling is not a competitive sport. These fans, known as smarts, understand that the genre is entertainment that presents the illusion of competitive sport. Smarts are aware of how wrestling matches are constructed to look real, and tend to focus on a match’s

construction instead of getting caught up in the spectacle itself. For smarts, it is not about suspending disbelief in order to enjoy a match, but rather to critically analyze a particular match and judge it according to how many maneuvers were mistimed or executed successfully. In addition, smarts are aware that wrestling companies are primarily trying to maximize profits, and the official narratives are structured in a manner to attract potential customers by heightening melodramatic conflict and producing satisfying resolutions.

I will provide an example in order to clarify this distinction between marks and smarts. The previously mentioned character of Triple H is often featured in the top matches of wrestling events. A mark would claim that Triple H competes in main events because he is the best wrestler in the company, citing his many victories over other wrestlers as proof of his superiority. A mark would also point to Triple H's impressive physique and array of wrestling maneuvers, noting that he is simply stronger and better than the competition. A smart, on the other hand, would argue that Triple H is headlining major wrestling events because his character garners the largest profit margin for the company, citing successful events he has headlined in the past. A smart would also argue that Triple H's backstage position of power in the company is the primary reason that he is the featured performer, noting his relationship with management. As we will see, Triple H is an extremely controversial figure in professional wrestling due to his status as both performer and member of management, but for now this example demonstrates the significant difference between marks and smarts.

There is an obvious disparity between marks and smarts, as marks seem unaware that professional wrestling is not an actual fight between mortal enemies, and smarts

appear to ignore the official narratives entirely. As mentioned previously, the Internet altered the ways in which audiences view professional wrestling texts, allowing for the proliferation of the meta-narratives that lie below the surface of wrestling texts. Marks have no knowledge of these meta-narratives, focusing solely on the official narratives in their reading processes. Smarts, on the other hand, seem incapable of appreciating the aesthetics of the genre that manifest themselves in the official texts. Instead, smarts focus solely on the meta-narratives, never suspending their disbelief long enough to become caught up in the matches themselves. Many wrestling fans do enjoy the aesthetics of professional wrestling texts, however. These fans also display the level of sophistication necessary to recognize the artifice of professional wrestling, meaning they are not marks. Rather, these fans consider themselves smart marks, or smarks (Brosnahan, 2006).

The term smark characterizes the majority of the audience for professional wrestling, as they are fully aware of the scripted nature of the genre as well as able to appreciate its aesthetics. As we will see in this thesis, the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community, provides significant evidence that smarks make up the majority of professional wrestling's fan community. In addition, fans exhibit the behaviors of a smark in the arenas that house wrestling performances, substantiating the claim that most wrestling fans are smarks. This behavior will be examined in subsequent chapters focusing on particular wrestling matches and characters. The presence of smarks at live wrestling events demonstrates that this characterization of wrestling fandom is not exclusive to the Internet.

Smarks read professional wrestling texts from the perspectives of both marks and smarts. The aesthetic pleasures of a particular match relate to how well the performers

in the match are able to facilitate suspension of disbelief. Put simply, smarks want to forget that what they are watching is not real, to believe that the match is legitimate competition between opponents who loathe each other. Once a particular match has concluded, smarks will respond accordingly to how well the performers allowed them to suspend their disbelief. Smarks consume both the official and meta-narratives. The two strands of narratives provide the context of the match, as opposed to the mark who only follows the official narrative and the smart who only follows the meta-narrative. This perspective of following both the official and meta-narratives of professional wrestling has led to new criteria for textual producers to adhere to. Smarks exhibit an extraordinary level of power over the meta-narratives of professional wrestling texts, and these narratives change the context of the official narratives of the textual producers. As we shall see, the reading processes of smarks force textual producers to adjust the content of media texts in order to account for the demands of the productive audience.

### **The Denigration of “Low” Culture**

Professional wrestling has, especially in recent years, become a site of much scholarly discourse due to its rise in popularity in American culture and because of academia’s growing recognition of the importance of studying popular culture. For example, Herbert Gans (1974), in *Popular Culture & High Culture*, claims that the veneration of high culture over popular culture is the result of the dominant class privileging its own tastes in order to maintain its position at the top of the cultural hierarchy (Pierre Bourdieu makes a similar argument in his influential *Distinction*, which



will be discussed below). Gans argues that popular culture provides the unique opportunity to examine the culture at large, since it is the texts of popular culture, rather than high culture, that best reflects the cultural consciousness.

Wrestling has much in common with other maligned genres associated with low culture such as soap operas and romance novels. All of these genres have distinctive signifying processes that must be understood in the context of the genre itself. Genres associated with low culture are often denigrated because they do not conform to the conventions of more acceptable genres. Robert Allen (1985), in his book *Speaking of Soap Operas*, argues that the genre of daytime soap operas is often derided by critics who have no knowledge about the genre's specific conventions. Allen posits that in order to understand the genre one must examine the genre's unique history, production practices, and the ways that the genre's audience consumes the texts (1985). Similarly, the genre of professional wrestling is often criticized by mainstream media sources, which dismiss the genre out of ignorance for its generic conventions. For example, ESPN radio host Colin Cowherd sparked controversy in November of 2005 for proclaiming that the death of professional wrestler Eddie Guerrero did not deserve mention in the Sports section of the newspaper because professional wrestlers are neither athletes nor participants in competitive sports (Martin, 2005). This proclamation is representative of the general disdain for the genre of professional wrestling in mainstream culture due to its hybrid status on the boundary of both sport and scripted serial narrative. Wrestling is not conducive to being examined by the same standards used for sports or serial television. Instead, the genre must be understood by its own unique generic conventions, which borrow from the conventions of sports and melodrama but fail to perfectly mimic either.

Similarly, Janice Radway's (1984) influential *Reading the Romance* argues that in order to comprehend the genre of romance novels, one must look at the genre's conventions and examine the specific ways in which the fans of the genre consume the texts. Radway's study reveals that romance novel readers consume these texts in an expression of their own independence, carving out their own private space away from their daily routine. Radway expertly demonstrates how audience reading practices are much more complex than simple "escape," as the very act of reading itself becomes an expression of identity and power. It is precisely this notion of power that lies at the heart of this analysis, as the reading practices of professional wrestling fans constitute a shift in the power relations between the textual producers and consumers. Beyond carving out a space for themselves by identifying as fans of professional wrestling, these fans enter into a new space where they can exert unprecedented influence over their genre's narratives. In this new space, fans of professional wrestling move beyond the exertion of authority in one's own life, and begin to exert power over the production practices of the actual object of their fandom.

### **Studies of Professional Wrestling by Scholars, Journalists, and Fans**

Unfortunately, the majority of the scholars who have studied professional wrestling have been quantitative social scientists who adhere to the "Effects model", presuming a simple cause-and-effect relationship between culture and behavior. For example, Woo and Kim (2003) argue that professional wrestling serves as a locale for "antisocial" behavior and could cause greater harm to vulnerable audiences than other

forms of entertainment. Intelligently, these authors expand their analysis from the wrestling matches themselves to include all components of the televised text, specifically focusing on what they called “nonmatch time”(Woo & Kim, 2003). (Nonmatch time refers to the inclusion of backstage interview segments, elaborate introductions, and all other components of the televised texts that do not include the simulated wrestling matches themselves.) Their study expands the semantics and syntax of the genre in that it accounts for generic conventions that are often overlooked in critical discourse about professional wrestling, namely that professional wrestling texts feature more than simulated wrestling matches. Similarly, Tamborini, Skalski, Lachlan, Westerman, Davis, and Smith (2005) perform a quantitative analysis of the levels of violence depicted in televised wrestling texts. Unsurprisingly, the authors discover that professional wrestling contains a significantly higher amount of depictions of violence than other television texts, arguing that this would potentially pose a greater risk of harm to susceptible viewers.

Both of these quantitative studies assume that the audiences of these texts are passive receivers of mediated images. I will examine the theoretical conception of the audience as passive in great detail below, but it is important to note that there are severe limitations with this argument. These analyses fail to account for the sophisticated reading processes that characterize smarks, or any audience. In addition, the conception of the passive audience removes all facets of power from the audience in their relationship with textual producers, reducing their role in the relationship to empty vessels awaiting instruction from media texts (or anything else that gets to them first).

In 1957 Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, published the seminal essay about professional wrestling in French society entitled “The World of Wrestling”. This work takes a different approach than the media effects studies mentioned previously. Barthes performs a semiotic analysis of the genre of professional wrestling at the time, analyzing the signification system of the genre in order to discern how the genre communicates with audiences. He concludes that the genre is in fact not a “sport” but a “spectacle” (Barthes, 1957). Professional wrestling in French society provides the illusion of competition and sport, but presents this display in its extreme so as to communicate a deeper meaning. Barthes argues that what professional wrestling actually presents are the concepts of “suffering and justice”, as the wrestlers enact choreographed depictions of a morality play (1957). Barthes’ close textual examination of professional wrestling serves as the foundation of the scholarly literature on the genre, and it is with this foundation that I will examine the genre of professional wrestling in American culture.

While many aspects of the genre of professional wrestling still correspond to the analysis proposed by Barthes almost fifty years ago, there have been significant changes in both the global culture and the genre itself since that time. Henry Jenkins (1997), in “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama”, updates the semiotic analysis of professional wrestling offered by Barthes. Jenkins focuses on the genre’s role in American culture in the early 1990s and argues that professional wrestling presents extreme versions of both “good” and “evil”, with no shades of grey (1997). Jenkins states:

“This public declaration ensures the constant moral legibility of the WWF narrative and thereby maximizes the audience’s own emotional response. Spectators come to the arena or turn on the programs to express intense emotion-

to cheer the hero, to boo and jeer the villain-without moral ambiguity or emotional complexity”(49).

Jenkins equates the genre of professional wrestling to the genre of melodrama in film in that it manifests itself in times of ideological crisis with clear delineations of character roles, such as good and evil. This way, there is no confusion as to the side the audience is supposed to take in the struggle, be it for the wrestlers in the ring or the cultural roles in everyday life.

Jenkins' article was published in 1997, and in the years since there have been even more significant changes in the culture and in the genre of professional wrestling. Specifically, the Internet has tremendously influenced both the culture and the genre of professional wrestling. The Internet provides a space where fans can debate the merits of particular characters or narratives of professional wrestling as well as disseminate new narratives that were previously unavailable to wrestling fans, what I have been calling meta-narratives. This new media technology has drastically altered the system of textual production and consumption, as fan cultures are now able to transcend temporal and geographic boundaries that have previously limited their ability to impact the production processes of textual producers. It is the goal of this thesis to bring the approaches pioneered by Barthes and Jenkins into the age of the Internet. Their distinguished and influential work on the genre of professional wrestling serves as the foundation of this analysis, affording me the necessary tools to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the genre and its powerful fan community.

It is important to place the genre of professional wrestling in its full cultural context in order to account for the semantic and syntactic elements that compose the genre. There have been significant changes to the genre of professional wrestling since

Jenkins' article. The period that Jenkins examines in his analysis, the early 1990s, saw professional wrestling's prominence in American culture decline significantly. In the 1980s, professional wrestling became a cultural phenomenon, soaring in popularity with household names such as Hulk Hogan and *WrestleMania*. The WWF, or World Wrestling Federation, targeted young children and was very successful in presenting colorful characters with easily identifiable gimmicks such as The Repo Man and The Big Boss Man (a police officer). By the early 1990s, however, many of those kids had become teenagers, and the popularity of the WWF, and by extension professional wrestling, began to wane. This is the era that Jenkins examines, and the genre was about to undergo significant changes. The WWF would soon abandon these colorful characters for an edgier, more controversial style.

This change in the style of the WWF occurred in the context of an inter-promotional war between the WWF and WCW, or World Championship Wrestling. At this point in the analysis it would be helpful to provide some background information about the economics of the wrestling industry. Vince McMahon is the majority owner of the WWF, as well as a performer himself, and his company transformed the wrestling business in the 1980s by producing a nationally syndicated program. Prior to McMahon's expansion, wrestling was a territorial business where each company produced programs for local markets. Once the WWF emerged as a national company, their main rival was WCW, which was owned by Turner Broadcasting Systems and broadcasted on Turner's national superstation. The war between these two companies led to an increase in wrestling's popularity in the 1990s, as the Internet allowed the tactics employed by each company to impair their competitor to become public. These tactics

were the most successful meta-narratives of all, as the backstage maneuverings of each company were enthusiastically examined and debated by Internet fans of wrestling.

The inter-promotional war between the WWF and WCW was the most significant feature of professional wrestling in the 1990s, but I do not wish to reduce the entire landscape of wrestling into two companies. The WWF and WCW represent the corporate manifestations of professional wrestling, but there are numerous independent wrestling companies throughout the United States, to say nothing of the wrestling companies in other parts of the world. For example, the independent company ECW, or Extreme Championship Wrestling, pioneered the edgier, controversial style appropriated by the WWF during the inter-promotional war with WCW in the 1990s. McMahon's WWF brought this style to mainstream audiences and reached new levels of success in the wrestling industry, eventually putting both WCW and ECW out of business. The last survivor of the Monday Night Wars is now known as the WWE, or World Wrestling Entertainment, after losing a copyright battle with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature in 2002. (This analysis will refer to the company as WWE from this point to avoid potential confusion.) Several smaller wrestling companies do currently operate in the United States, including Ring of Honor (ROH) and Total Nonstop Action (TNA), but these companies reach only a fraction of the WWE's total audience and pose little threat to WWE's dominance in the wrestling industry.

Reynolds and Alvarez (2004) provide an excellent historical analysis of the rise in popularity of professional wrestling in the late 1990s in *The Death of WCW*. The authors vividly describe the ways in which the WWF and WCW competed over the attention of wrestling fans and how the fans ultimately determined the victor in this inter-promotional

war (Reynolds & Alvarez, 2004). According to Reynolds and Alvarez, the Internet became the site of much fan discourse during this inter-promotional war, demonstrating the increased role new media technologies play in the consumption of these texts. Reynolds and Alvarez approach the subject of professional wrestling as both fans and journalists. Each author maintains a website devoted to wrestling, and Alvarez earns his living from producing a weekly newsletter about the genre, similar to the work of industry insider Dave Meltzer who is discussed below.

Reynolds and Alvarez demonstrate the value to scholars of sophisticated work produced by fans. Their first-hand knowledge of the war between the WWF and WCW is presented through their own experience, as they were part of the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community, who ultimately determined the fate of WCW. Many fans have detailed knowledge of the intricacies of professional wrestling (or any genre that defines their fandom) and these fans are capable of providing crucial information not available in many academic studies on the genre.

My own analysis is coming from the perspective of both a fan and a scholar. Similar to these authors, I have first-hand experience of the rise in popularity of professional wrestling in the 1990s. In addition, my work as a scholar affords me the ability to bring theoretical tools and knowledge of cultural studies to this analysis of professional wrestling. This knowledge of semiotic theory and cultural studies is unavailable to most fans of professional wrestling, inhibiting their ability to identify the formal structures of the genre and situate these structures as devices employed by media producers for specific purposes. Rather than appreciating professional wrestling for any aesthetic pleasures it may provide, the tools of semiotic theory and cultural studies allow



for the generic texts to be cracked open, displaying both how they are constructed by media producers and the complex reading processes employed by wrestling fans. In addition, these scholarly tools allow for the identification of a struggle between wrestling producers and fans, as each side battles for control over the direction of official narratives. My goal is to provide a detailed critical analysis alongside my knowledge accumulated as a fan of the genre. As we shall see, Matt Hills (2002) makes the distinction between “fan-scholar” and “scholar-fan”, warning that critics must be wary of falling into the trap of being a “fan-scholar”. The distinction between the two will be examined in detail in a separate section, but it is important to note that fan knowledge brings more to the table than it is often given credit for.

The *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, which is a weekly publication produced by Dave Meltzer since 1982, serves to supplement the historical analysis performed by Reynolds and Alvarez. Meltzer is more than a fan of professional wrestling. He makes his living reporting on the meta-narratives of the genre, serving as the premiere journalist in the wrestling industry. This publication provides detailed accounts of how professional wrestling texts perform in the Nielsen ratings as well as sales numbers for WWE and WCW Pay-Per-View events. These numbers, with the help of television industry journals such as *Variety*, will allow me to trace the economic performance of the professional wrestling industry and to situate it within the larger media landscape. In addition, the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* examines the industrial practices that competing wrestling companies employ, as well as how they respond to fan demands. Meltzer’s publication precedes the rise of the Internet as a mass medium and has served as a locale for the generation of meta-narratives since its inception. In fact, many of the

Internet websites devoted to professional wrestling credit Meltzer as the basis for any news or narratives about the happenings behind the scenes in professional wrestling, making his newsletter one of the primary generators of the genre's meta-narratives.

### **Theoretical Conceptions of Audiences**

As we have seen, academic scholarship on the conception of audiences has fallen into three separate generations, envisioning the audience as passive, active, and creative. Each theoretical model successively provides more power to the audience in the relationship between textual producers and consumers. This analysis will examine each of the theoretical models for examining audiences before positing a fourth model, what I have called the productive audience.

In its infancy, audience reception studies envisioned the audience as a vulnerable entity at the mercy of mass mediated images. This model positions audiences as passive consumers of media texts, and is commonly referred to as the effects model. For example, Fredric Wertham (1954) cautions of the perils that were inherent in consuming pulp literature, particularly comic books, in "Seduction of the Innocent". He claims that exposure to these texts increases the likelihood of children becoming juvenile delinquents (Wertham, 1954, p. 63). Wertham's study was published in 1954, and although communication scholarship has advanced a great deal since that time, this notion of the vulnerable audience still persists today. It seems that every few years one politician or another will condemn the media for depicting gratuitous violence or sex at the expense of the vulnerable masses.

Expectedly, professional wrestling is often included in many diatribes criticizing media texts for their depictions of gratuitous sex and violence. For example, the PTC, or Parents Television Council, spearheaded a boycott of WWE programs in 2000 because they disagreed with their content. In addition, the PTC blamed the WWE for the deaths of four children due to the deaths occurring when the children were imitating wrestling moves they saw on television (Foley, 2001). Scholars such as David Morley (1992) contend that the model of the passive audience equates the text to a “hypodermic needle”(45). The media text injects meaning into vulnerable audiences, and individuals are incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality.

This model of the audience as powerless to resist mediated messages is grossly inadequate for understanding how audiences read media texts. For example, Gerard Jones (2002), in *Killing Monsters*, argues that the effects model fails to account for how children use “make-believe” violence in their development. If audiences are indeed passive, as this model contends, then all of the children who are fans of comic books, *Pokemon*, and violent games would become social pariahs. Instead, Jones argues that these texts can have a positive impact on a child’s development, including the facilitation of a personal and social identity. Audiences are not passive sponges who simply absorb information and direction, as they display traits that demonstrate active resistance and negotiation to many mediated messages.

The second generation of media scholars challenged the model of the passive audience, arguing that audiences display levels of resistance and negotiation to mediated messages. These scholars conceive of the audience as active readers of media texts. David Morley (1992), adopting the encoding/decoding perspective pioneered by Stuart

Hall, argues that media texts do have a dominant message “encoded” within it by the producers of the text (54). However, Morley contends that the audience subsequently “decodes” the text in a preferred, oppositional, or negotiated manner (1992). Audiences who decode the text in a preferred manner are behaving similar to the model of the passive audience. They are receiving the intended message of the text’s producers, reading the text in the way the producers intended. However, audiences can also read the text in an oppositional manner, meaning that they are displaying resistance to the intended reading of the text. Rather than the text simply injecting meaning into a passive audience member, oppositional readings provide the space for rejection of the messages within the text. In addition, Morley contends that audiences can read texts in a negotiated manner, referring to a combination of preferred and oppositional readings. Some audience members may reject only portions of the text, or may enjoy only some of the aspects of a given media text. These audience members are reading texts in a negotiated manner according to Morley.

The model of the active audience also includes scholars who posit the notion of the “polysemic” text. The term of polysemy refers to the idea that there are an infinite number of potential readings for a particular text. For example, Stephen Hinerman (1992), in “I’ll Be Here With You,” chronicles the varying uses fans can have for the media image of Elvis Presley. Hinerman depicts one fan he met through his ethnographic study who proudly discusses how the figure of Elvis helped her cope with the death of her child, while another fan claims that Elvis provided her with a “sexual awakening”(130). These varying accounts of what Elvis meant to disparate audience members demonstrates that media images and texts mean different things to different

people. In fact, it is one's own cultural context and sense of identity that negotiates the potential meanings of media images and texts (Hinerman, 1992). These examples perfectly demonstrate the model of the active audience and sharply contrast with the model of the passive audience described above.

The influential book by Henry Jenkins (1992), *Textual Poachers*, extends this model even further and represents the third generation of media scholarship on audiences. Jenkins argues that in addition to being active readers of media texts, audiences can be conceived as creative. Jenkins contends that fans operate from a position of "cultural weakness" and thus cannot directly impact media producers (26). However, these fans can exert a form of control over media texts by appropriating them for their own uses. This appropriation is the essence of textual poaching. Fans poach from the official media texts that they are fans of and rewrite the narratives to suit their own needs, producing works of fan fiction that are independent of the official texts. This process transforms their status from textual consumers to producers. For example, Jenkins chronicles the rise of "slash fiction", which is works of fiction produced by fans depicting a homosexual relationship between characters of an official narrative. These fans contend that the official text points to the existence of a homosexual relationship between diegetic characters, but the relationship is repressed in the official narrative. Slash fiction provides a space where fans can explore this relationship independent of the official narrative. Jenkins points to the slash fiction in the Star Trek universe that posits a homosexual relationship between Kirk and Spock, two central characters in the Star Trek mythology. This model of audiences as creative drastically changes the relationship

between textual producers and consumers, as now audience members are blurring the distinctions between the two.

But Jenkins' creative audiences still produce works of fan fiction that exist on the periphery of the official narratives. These instances of fan fiction add to the overall mythology of textual creations, but the connection to the texts produced by the media industry itself is limited. The fans of professional wrestling extend this model even further by exhibiting more power over the official narratives of textual producers. Rather than existing solely on the periphery of the official narratives, the contributions of the fan community of professional wrestling directly impact the media producers themselves. This is the hallmark of the productive audience model, as fan contributions are no longer relegated to the fringes of the production process. Previous models of the audience allows for how fans impact textual producers in a subtle manner, but this model explains how the audience can seize power from textual producers and participate in the construction of official narratives. My analysis will demonstrate specific instances where fans have changed the narratives of professional wrestling texts by voicing their approval or displeasure with the official narratives as well as meta-narratives that impact how the texts are read.

### **Fan Culture and Cultural Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), in the influential *Distinction*, examines the correlations between the economic structures of society and the cultural system that separates social classes. Bourdieu, following Marx, maintains that culture is structured to generate and

reproduce stratifications of economic and social power. In a capitalist society there is an uneven distribution of wealth, or economic capital, in order to distinguish between social classes, specifically the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Bourdieu argues that this economic system parallels a cultural system in society, with an uneven distribution of cultural capital between the social classes. Cultural capital is a commodity that can be acquired through access to institutions such as universities, which in turn leads to access to higher paying jobs, and art museums, which house artifacts associated with the tastes of those already in possession of copious amounts of cultural capital. The cultural system privileges certain tastes over others in an attempt to maintain the discrepancies between social classes. The bourgeoisie, or those who possess both substantial amounts of economic and cultural capital, serve as the gatekeepers of culture, legitimizing certain forms of art that are inaccessible to the lower classes of society.

John Fiske (1992) appropriates the theoretical model proposed by Bourdieu in his article, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom". Fiske maintains that fan cultures organize themselves in a manner similar to Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital. Rather than investing in traditional instances of high art, or cultural texts associated with gaining cultural capital, Fiske argues that fan cultures immerse themselves in artifacts of popular culture, or cultural texts associated with little cultural capital. There is a dual reason for this selection of popular culture texts as objects of fandom. First of all, Fiske maintains that these fans are often disconnected from the avenues of access to high culture. The objects of their fandom do not convert to the economic capital in the model proposed by Bourdieu, forcing fan cultures to organize themselves outside of the cultural hierarchy in capitalist society. Secondly, fans of popular culture texts often form personal

attachments to the objects of their fandom and participate in fan production, recalling the creative audiences described by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. These instances of fan produced texts, as well as knowledge about the text that inspires the fandom, substitutes for the cultural capital described by Bourdieu. Fan cultures organize themselves hierarchically, similar to capitalist society, except the cultural capital does not translate to economic capital in the manner proposed by Bourdieu. Instead, fan cultures use knowledge about popular culture texts as well as fan-produced texts to determine the stratification of their specific subculture.

Matt Hills' (2002) book, *Fan Cultures*, expands on Fiske's analysis by exploring how fan cultures organize themselves into distinct subcultures. Hills argues that fan cultures often resist the official meanings textual producers inscribe in the texts and posit their own meanings to these texts. This notion of resistance plays a crucial role in the identification processes within fan cultures as residing outside of the mainstream culture. Hills maintains that these fan communities establish their own guidelines and rules for establishing the worth of media texts. In addition, Hills examines how the fan community is hierarchically structured, meaning that fans can attain a certain status within these subcultures that corresponds to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Hills claims that knowledge about a specific text or genre translates to reverence within that genre's fan community, earning that particular fan a form of cultural capital, what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls "subcultural capital," that the fan community recognizes but the society outside of the fan community does not.

Hills' analysis also recognizes the negative connotations associated with fandom through the exploration of the distinction between "fan-scholars" and "scholar-



fans”(2002). According to Hills, fan-scholars are fans who possess an extraordinary amount of knowledge about a specific text, making them similar in some ways to an academic scholar. “Elite fans become in effect scholars of their idols”(Hills, 2002, p. 17). Scholar-fans, on the other hand, are academics that are also fans of a particular genre or text. Hills argues these scholar-fans must maintain a level of distance from the object of their fandom so as to conform to the accepted role of the academic. Hills writes:

“For example, I am able to work as an academic despite (or rather, because of) having been a fan of cult TV and science fiction all my life only because I present an identity which conforms to institutional expectations. I give lectures which refer to academic books (most of the time), I offer arguments for and against theoretical positions, I use a specific academic language, and I possess the qualifications which are required of me professionally...Any and all attempts at hybridizing and combining ‘fan’ and ‘academic’ identities/subjectivities must therefore remain sensitive to those institutional contexts which disqualify certain ways of speaking and certain ways of presenting the self”(20).

Hills identifies primarily with the role of the scholar, exhibiting traits of the fan only in the proper cultural context. Scholar-fans are by this definition scholars who can behave like fans when the situation arises and fan-scholars are fans who build up knowledge about a subject in a manner similar to a scholar. Hills’ categories maintain rigid boundaries, but acknowledge the similarities between the two categories. His analysis makes great strides in fan studies by legitimizing the knowledge within fan communities, linking this knowledge with the cultural capital of a scholar. However, this distinction is problematic because Hills argues that scholar-fans and fan-scholars cannot “properly” traverse between the two categories due to institutional constraints. In the context of academia, the term scholar receives the position of privilege by appearing before the hyphen. Similarly, in the context of a fan community, the term fan is privileged over the

scholar distinction. These institutional contexts, according to Hills, create a need to privilege one title over the other in order to conform to the pressures and standards imposed by the specific institution.

However, I would speculate that, as wrestling fandom has demonstrated, no such need exists. Some wrestling fans are marks, as they have no knowledge of the meta-narratives described previously. Some wrestling fans are smarts, as they take little pleasure from the official narratives and instead focus solely on the meta-narratives. I argue that most wrestling fans are smarks, or a combination of marks and smarts. Smarks are completely aware and actually enjoy the meta-narratives that surround wrestling texts, but they also take great pleasure in the official narratives presented in the televised texts. These smarks suspend their disbelief long enough to appreciate the wrestling matches, successfully blocking out the artifice of professional wrestling and enjoying the contest as if they were a mark. Rather than privileging smarts over marks, or for that matter marks over smarts, the term smark eliminates the necessity to privilege either classification.

Similarly, the distinction between scholar-fans and fan-scholars seems reconcilable, as their titles suggest. Why choose one over the other when you could be both simultaneously? Every scholar is a fan in some way, and fans can either be scholars themselves or display a wealth of knowledge that parallels the breadth of knowledge of a scholar. I am approaching this study under the guise of both a fan and a scholar, as my knowledge from both classifications affords me insights unavailable to the other. However, I am not privileging one distinction over the other, choosing instead to recognize the difference between the two while simultaneously allowing for each distinction to supplement the other. I am a fan and a scholar, but not a fan-scholar or

scholar-fan. Rather than using a hyphen to distinguish the privileged distinction, perhaps we could use professional wrestling as a model and combine the two terms. I propose replacing fan-scholar and scholar-fan with either “folar” or “schan” so that the subjectivity of neither fans nor scholars is privileged. At this juncture, this critique of Hills is purely speculative in nature, as institutional constraints do play an important role in the subjectivities of both scholars and fans. I am attempting to perform this analysis under the lens of both a scholar and a fan simultaneously, privileging neither distinction. Future research could explore this phenomenon in greater detail to test the applicability of Hills’ two categories.

Elana Shefrin (2004) extends the influential argument made by Hills by reconfiguring the relationship between textual producers and consumers in her article, “*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and Participatory Fandom.” Shefrin claims that fan cultures have had a dramatic impact on the careers of both Peter Jackson and George Lucas, the directors of the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* film franchises. Shefrin posits that fan cultures have lauded the work of Jackson with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as he met fan expectations through the maintenance of an open dialogue with the trilogy’s fans during the production of the films. Jackson provided constant updates on the Internet about the film’s production status and even allowed for fans to collaborate with the producers of the text through the film’s official website. Shefrin argues that this strategy has afforded Jackson an increase in cultural capital among the fan community of the *Lord of the Rings* franchise, as well as an increase in economic capital due to the success of the films.

On the other hand, Shefrin points to the career of George Lucas as an example of a media producer not listening to the demands of his fan community and subsequently losing both economic and cultural capital. Lucas had previously earned tremendous amounts of economic and cultural capital with the original *Star Wars* trilogy in the seventies and eighties, but Shefrin examines how Lucas targeted young audiences with the second trilogy in the franchise. She maintains that this focus on a new audience leads to a disconnect between fans from the previous installments and Lucas himself, costing him cultural capital within the fan community devoted to the texts that he created. Rather than trying to meet the expectations of his established fan community, Shefrin claims that Lucas ignored those fans and attempted to appease a brand new audience.

Similarly, professional wrestling fans can impact the careers of textual producers. But rather than assessing the worth of a text after it has been released, the fan community of professional wrestling has a unique opportunity to contribute to the narrative as it unfolds. There is no “end” to professional wrestling narratives, as each narrative thread is situated within a larger diegesis. There are many wrestling companies, such as WWE, ROH, and so on, and each match that takes place within the diegetic world of one company is also evaluated within the larger universe that is professional wrestling. It is important to note that the previous analysis focused solely on fictional narratives such as *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*. Professional wrestling’s unique status as a hybrid of fictional entertainment narratives and competitive sport marks a departure from the scholarly literature on this phenomenon. In American culture, it could be argued that sports has an even more loyal, vocal fan community than fictional entertainment narratives, as it is not uncommon for fans of particular sports franchises to adorn

themselves in the team's colors or scream passionately when their home team scores. Professional wrestling, which borrows from the conventions of sports and fictional entertainment narratives, provides an opportunity to transcend the boundaries between these two different forms of media texts. Therefore, the results of this study are not limited to just sports fans or fictional entertainment fans, but could possibly be applicable to both.

### **The Internet as the Site of Fan Discourse**

The Internet serves as the catalyst for the dynamic relationship between textual producers and consumers. This new communication technology has allowed for the proliferation and organization of fan cultures across the world and pressured textual producers to meet the demands of this audience. However, fan cultures are not the direct result of this new media technology. Fan cultures existed long before the advent of the Internet and have always exercised some form of impact on the creation of media texts. For example, Sue Brower (1992), in "Fans as Tastemakers: Viewers for Quality Television", chronicles the creation of the group called The Viewers for Quality Television, which enacted campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s to save specific television programs that were in danger of being cancelled such as the show *Cagney and Lacey*. There have been many similar campaigns throughout television's history, demonstrating how audiences can participate in the production processes of media texts.

But before the Internet, these campaigns were much more difficult to organize due to geographic and temporal limitations. The Internet has collapsed these limitations,

allowing for audiences to have a more direct impact on the creation of media texts. Fan communities now have the space to convene without the restrictions of space and time that were previously a hindrance. Not only can audience members communicate with the textual producers more easily, they can also communicate with themselves, strengthening the community component of the fan culture. This new communication technology has also allowed for the proliferation of narratives that are not created by the textual producers themselves, what I have called meta-narratives. Stories about the production of the media texts are often disseminated over the Internet and fan communities spend much time debating the ramifications of these hidden narratives.

These meta-narratives that circulate on the Internet are markedly different from the fan-fiction of Jenkins' creative audience. Rather than standing as works of fiction themselves, these meta-narratives represent discourses surrounding the official narratives of textual producers. In this space the merits of the official narratives are debated and grassroots movements are organized in an attempt to change the direction of official narratives that are deemed unacceptable. For example, Ted Friedman (1995) examines how fans of pop-singer Debbie Gibson attempted to increase the album sales of the artist. Friedman argues that what matters most to these fans is the sense of "engagement" with the direction of the career of Debbie Gibson, being somewhat responsible for a career rebirth for the artist. This notion of engagement is an essential characteristic of the model of the productive audience. Rather than producing a piece of fiction about Gibson or a particular wrestler, these fans hope to have a direct impact on the direction of their heroes' careers. This analysis will demonstrate that this impact is precisely what occurs within the context of professional wrestling.

## Chapter Two

### Wrestling With Signs: The Generic Conventions of Professional Wrestling

#### Introduction

The genre of professional wrestling is often labeled a “soap opera for men” due to its employment of melodrama and seriality. Professional wrestling borrows generic conventions from both entertainment and sports programming, combining them to form unique signifying practices. Wrestling is neither pure melodrama nor pure sport, but rather a hybrid of these two genres and any attempt to understand the unique signifying practices of professional wrestling must examine how the genre blends these conventions to create something altogether different. This chapter will examine the semantics and syntax of professional wrestling through a close textual analysis of one wrestling match from January of 2000 between Triple H and Cactus Jack at a pay-per-view event entitled the *Royal Rumble*. This analysis will demonstrate that professional wrestling has its own unique signifying processes that are read by knowledgeable audience members of the genre’s conventions. In addition, this analysis will explore the complex ways in which audiences read both official narratives produced by the WWE, or World Wrestling Entertainment, and meta-narratives that exist outside of the diegetic universe of professional wrestling. At the conclusion of this chapter, the existence of these meta-

narratives will be evident and point towards a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the official media producers and the knowledgeable fan community of the genre.

### **Professional Wrestling and Melodrama**

Peter Brooks (1976) argues that the fundamental characteristic of melodrama is “the desire to express all”(p. 4). Tracing the history of melodrama through the novels of Balzac and Henry James, Brooks maintains that melodrama aims for the “total articulation of the grandiose moral terms of the drama,” leaving nothing unsaid and providing a voice for feelings and emotions that exist deep within individual characters (p. 8). Brooks goes on to delineate the generic conventions of melodrama, which include: “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression”(p. 11). These narrative conventions facilitate the exploration of emotions and feelings in the individual characters by placing the emphasis on the everyday, ordinary events in the characters’ lives because the action happens on the inside of the characters. According to Brooks, the location of the dramatic conflict in the melodramatic text is in the “moral occult,” which refers to the struggle of spiritual forces that reside in reality but are simultaneously masked by it (p. 5). Themes such as jealousy, betrayal, and seduction serve as vehicles for characters to externalize their feelings and emotions, to articulate what is on the inside of their characters. As we shall see, professional wrestling shares many of the narrative



conventions of melodrama in order to provide motivation for particular wrestlers to engage in battle within wrestling rings.

The role of gesture in melodrama takes on a metaphoric function because each gesture must speak of and refer to something else. In melodramatic texts, the range of expression is limited in that characters cannot express the grandiose moral concepts that are at odds in the narrative. The role of gesture in melodrama is to stand for the limitations of language to convey the intense emotional feelings of the characters and the complex, moral concepts that are at stake in the narrative. It is through the signifying powers of gesture, rather than language, that the audience experiences the pains and pleasures of the characters. Brooks argues that in melodramatic texts, “gestures cease to be merely tokens of social intercourse whose meaning is assigned by a social code; they become the vehicles of metaphors whose tenor suggests another kind of reality”(p. 9).

Roland Barthes (1957) explores this role of exaggerated gesture in professional wrestling. Barthes states that, “wrestling offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning...a man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness”(p. 24). This exaggeration of gesture is a fundamental convention of the genre of professional wrestling in that it is directly related to the genre’s artifice. The masquerade of an actual fight is successful in direct correlation to how well the wrestlers “sell” the legitimacy of wrestling holds and maneuvers. The art of selling refers to the wrestler on the receiving end of a particular maneuver pretending that they are in excruciating pain, which draws the audience into the narrative of the wrestling match. Barthes extends this argument by stating that in addition to seeing that the wrestlers are suffering, the exaggerated gesture

also conveys why the wrestler is suffering. According to Barthes, wrestling matches serve as metaphors for the moral concepts of Suffering and Justice, and it is through exaggerated gestures that the audience is made aware of the moral struggle between the forces of “Good” and “Evil”.

The existence of clearly identifiable embodiments of good and evil is another characteristic of melodrama that is shared by professional wrestling. Barthes states that professional wrestling is a “spectacle of excess,” and it is through this spectacle that issues of ethics and morality are staged in a manner similar to melodrama (p. 23). In order to ensure the signification of absolute moral concepts, Barthes maintains that, “Each sign in wrestling is therefore endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot”(p. 24). Barthes uses the example of a wrestler named Thauvin, whose repugnant, obese body signifies an aesthetic to be rejected by the audience, clearly positioning the crowd’s affinity with his opponent before the match even begins. Thauvin’s actions during the match validate this repudiation, as he plays the role of the treacherous coward throughout the match. Barthes calls the character of Thauvin a “perfect bastard,” which corresponds the role of the heel in wrestling today.

Henry Jenkins (1997) comes to similar conclusions as Barthes in his analysis of WWE (formerly WWF) programming in the early 1990s. Jenkins argues that in the WWF, “wrestlers experience no internal conflicts which might blur their moral distinctiveness”(p. 46). In order for a particular wrestler to embody the moral concepts of good or evil, the audience must be able to identify the characters’ affiliations without fail, ensuring that the hero is cheered while the villain is jeered. For example, Jenkins examines the various ways that Jake “The Snake” Roberts embodies the moral concept of

evil, citing that it is in his nature as a snake to represent evil. Jenkins states that, “We know Jake is evil and without redemption because he tells us so over and over... This public declaration ensures the constant moral legibility of the WWF narrative and thereby maximizes the audience’s own emotional response”(p.48-49). This clear identification of Roberts, and all heels in professional wrestling, as the embodiment of evil allows for the audience to recognize the threat to the moral order they represent and rejoice in the threat’s purgation.

### **Professional Wrestling as Sport**

As I described in chapter one, professional wrestling is scripted rather than legitimate competition. The performers are not trying to injure each other in an actual fight, but rather attempting to present the illusion of physical combat in the context of a wrestling match. This illusion of legitimate competition borrows from the genre of sports, notably boxing and amateur wrestling, in order to appeal to the fans of competitive, athletic contests. The wrestlers attempt to mask the scripted nature of professional wrestling by selling each blow as a legitimate physical attack that causes pain. In actuality, wrestlers are pulling their punches and attempting to protect their fellow performers, as one wrong move could have severe repercussions. One trick employed by professional wrestlers is to stomp the mat when throwing a punch or kick, as the noise generated by the stomp helps provide the illusion of physical contact. In addition, wrestlers communicate with each other and with the referee during the match themselves. This communication between the participants ensures that every one

involved knows what moves the wrestlers are planning to execute, as well as to monitor the condition of the participants. If some one is injured during the course of a wrestling match, they will often whisper to their opponent and the referee that they have to “take it home,” referring to the need to advance to the conclusion of the match.

The scripted nature of professional wrestling has often led to the genre being called “fake,” which does not account for what actually happens in the context of wrestling matches. Although wrestlers pull their punches to minimize the potential for harm to their opponents, there is plenty of real labor and athleticism involved in the staging of wrestling matches. Wrestling matches are often evaluated by wrestling fans on the basis of how much the match allowed for the suspension of their disbelief. A match that made the audience momentarily forget that wrestling is scripted is often labeled as a great match. Many wrestlers are also fans of the genre, which led to them becoming wrestlers themselves. As fans, the wrestlers evaluate their own matches and attempt to provide the audience with wrestling contests that meet both the audience’s and their own high standards. These wrestlers are trying to have the best matches, so they will often hit each other very hard during the course of a match, facilitating the audience’s suspension of disbelief. The more real the match appears, the greater the possibility of fans displaying the characteristics of a mark during the course of the match.

Professional wrestlers are often compared to stuntmen, as they possess the knowledge of how to fall with their weight evenly distributed in order to minimize the risk of severe damage. Like stuntmen wrestlers train at great length in order to learn the proper way to fall in order to protect their head and neck to avoid serious injury. However, wrestling takes a toll on the bodies of the performers, as many wrestlers subsist

on pain pills just to make it through the day (Meltzer, 2006). Mick Foley, a former wrestler, had to retire at the age of thirty-four due to the damage wrestling inflicted on his body during his eighteen year career. His autobiography provides a detailed account of the long list of injuries incurred during his wrestling career, including the loss of one of his ears, multiple concussions, and a dislocated kneecap. The bodies of wrestlers such as Mick Foley serve as evidence that the term fake is not an accurate description of the genre of professional wrestling, which is why I have referred to wrestling as scripted rather than fake.

Professional wrestling is presented under the guise of legitimate sport in the genre's official narratives. The goal of a wrestling match is to defeat your opponent by either pinning his shoulders to the mat for the count of three, or making him submit to a wrestling hold that is too painful to endure. However, there are rules in professional wrestling that make certain actions illegal and grounds for a disqualification by the referee. For example, hitting your opponent with a weapon such as a ringside chair or a concealed pair of brass knuckles will lead to a disqualification if the referee detects the violation. There are some matches in professional wrestling, however, that waive these rules. These matches are called "Street Fights," as the rules that govern professional wrestling matches do not apply. Over the years, professional wrestling has adopted many new match types, including "Ladder matches" and "Cage Matches," and these matches all feature unique sets of rules that are understood by the fan community of professional wrestling. This analysis will focus on a Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack, and the rules of the match state that everything is legal and the performers can go to any extreme they desire in order to defeat their opponent.

### **The Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble***

I have selected the Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack as an example of professional wrestling's signifying processes even though the match does not follow the traditional rules of wrestling. As I mentioned above, a Street Fight means that there are no rules or limitations as to what extremes the participants can resort to in order to vanquish their opponent. It is a wrestling match pushed to its limits, as the participants mutilate themselves and each other for the enjoyment of the fan community of the genre. Although this match does not follow the rules of most professional wrestling matches, the Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack illustrates the existence of meta-narratives surrounding the official narratives of wrestling texts. In this analysis, I will examine the official narratives and meta-narratives that led to the staging of this particular match, focusing on the participants in the match and the discourses surrounding their particular characters. Once this analysis is complete, I will focus in on the match itself, examining the generic conventions of professional wrestling as they manifest themselves during the course of the match. Finally, I will examine the outcome of this match, focusing on the official and meta-narratives that place this match in its generic context. The Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack took place in the WWE during the *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view event on January 23, 2000 in Madison Square Garden. The match was the main selling point of the *Royal Rumble*, and Mick Foley (who plays the character of Cactus Jack) cites the match as being one of his career favorites in his second autobiography, *Foley is Good*.

### **The Official Narrative of the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble***

In the weeks leading up to the *Royal Rumble* event, WWE programming presented an official narrative depicting a transformation in the character of Cactus Jack. Prior to his joining the WWE, Mick Foley wrestled as Cactus Jack in wrestling companies such as WCW (World Championship Wrestling), ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling), and various organizations based in Japan. Throughout his career in these wrestling promotions, Cactus Jack developed a reputation for being “hardcore,” referring to the types of matches he subjected his body to. For example, Cactus Jack competed in numerous matches in Japan where the ropes that surrounded the ring were replaced with barbed wire, resulting in numerous visible scars on his arms and torso. When Foley began his employment in the WWE, the creative team abandoned the character of Cactus Jack and provided a new character for Foley entitled Mankind. The Mankind character resulted from the style employed by the WWE at the time, featuring fewer hardcore matches and focusing instead on over-the-top characters. Rather than acknowledging Foley’s past accomplishments as Cactus Jack, the WWE chose to present him as an entirely new character with a different history. The Mankind character wore a mask similar to the one popularized by Anthony Hopkins in the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) in order to separate this new character from Foley’s previous incarnation as Cactus Jack. However, many wrestling fans had followed Foley’s career in other wrestling companies and were aware of his history as Cactus Jack, and the official narrative of the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* incorporated this history in an attempt to provide context to the match.

Prior to the encounter at the *Royal Rumble*, Triple H wrestled Mankind on an episode of *Monday Night Raw*, WWE's weekly wrestling program on the USA Network. The result of this match was Triple H clearly defeating Mankind, proving to be the better competitor and worthy of being the company's world champion. In the official narratives of professional wrestling, the world champion is regarded as the world's best wrestler. In the meta-narratives of professional wrestling, the world champion is the company's main star and selling point for pay-per-view events and wrestling cards held throughout the world. After failing to defeat Triple H, Mankind appeared before the live crowd on *WWE Smackdown!* (the other weekly wrestling program of WWE) and issued a challenge for the *Royal Rumble*. What follows is the transcription of Mankind's challenge to Triple H:

\ “So it saddens me to say that after the beating you gave me on Monday night, one thing that Mankind is not, is ready to face you at the *Royal Rumble* in Madison Square Garden. Because you are without a doubt ‘The Game,’ you are the best in the business right now. And Mankind in some way is just a beaten-up pathetic fool. But I think the fans deserve a substitute in the match. So what I'm going to do, Triple H, is I'm going to name him right now. I think you know the guy, his name is Cactus Jack”(Foley, 1999, p. 338).

At this point Mankind removed his mask and the shirt he was wearing to reveal a Cactus Jack T-shirt.

The metamorphosis of Mankind into Cactus Jack demonstrates the significance of character names in professional wrestling. By referring to himself as Cactus Jack, Foley instantly restored credibility to his character, recalling the hardcore connotations associated with the name Cactus Jack. Triple H may have vanquished Mankind, but Cactus Jack presented an entirely new challenge for the world champion. The removal of the Mankind mask and display of the Cactus Jack T-shirt made the metamorphosis complete, even though underneath was the same human being who Triple H defeated a



few short days ago. The rules of the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble*, or more specifically the absence of rules, now favored the Cactus Jack character. To cement this official narrative, the camera cut to an immediate reaction shot of Triple H after Foley's challenge, and his face changed from a look of smug cockiness to an expression of complete fear.

In December of 1999, Triple H won the world title at a pay-per-view event entitled *Armageddon*. The character of Triple H was presented as a cocky, arrogant villain from Greenwich, Connecticut. The full name of his character is Hunter Hearst Helmsley, signifying a life of privilege and excess. Rather than toiling away for years in hardcore matches across the globe, as Foley did, the Triple H character was afforded opportunities based on his pedigree. In fact, "The Pedigree" is the name of Triple H's signature wrestling maneuver. I will discuss the signifying processes of wrestling "finishers" in a subsequent section, but it is important to note that the names of certain maneuvers are signifiers both in the context of a wrestling match and in narratives about the characters that employ them. The name of Triple H's finisher reflects the privileged lifestyle led by the character, alienating the character from many wrestling fans who have to work for everything they have.

The Triple H character is the heel, or villain, in this match. The audience is encouraged to jeer against Triple H due to both what his character represents and for his villainous actions in the diegesis of professional wrestling. For example, Triple H often employs the use of a sledgehammer to win his matches. When the referee is distracted, or sometimes unconscious, Triple H will often grab his weapon of choice from under the ring, hit his opponent, and win the match as the oblivious referee reaches a count of three.

Actions such as these signify villainous tactics, as Triple H flagrantly breaks the rules of professional wrestling in front of the audience. The referee's failure to catch the violation, as well as the use of a weapon to defeat the hero of the match, cements Triple H's status as the villain in wrestling's diegesis. As we shall see, however, Triple H's villainous actions in the official narrative cannot compare to the meta-narratives surrounding his character.

Before examining the meta-narratives surrounding the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble*, I would like to comment on the significance of Cactus Jack and Triple H's bodies. Barthes (1957) argues that the villain in wrestling must exhibit repugnant qualities in his body in order to signify feelings of repulsion to the crowd. He provides the example of Thauvin, whose body is described as obese and sagging. However, the roles of good and evil are reversed in the examples of Triple H and Cactus Jack. Triple H, who is a villain like Thauvin, possesses a chiseled physique with long blonde hair. He is statuesque, possessing very little body fat or visible scars. Cactus Jack, on the other hand, is overweight with a long, unkempt beard. Numerous scars litter his body, the result of many hardcore matches throughout his career. The dichotomy between these two wrestlers' physical appearance demonstrates a shift in professional wrestling's conventions since the analyses of scholars such as Barthes (1957) and Jenkins (1997).

The hero, or babyface, of the match is Cactus Jack, while the villain is Triple H, reversing the roles proposed by Barthes in 1957. This reversal begs the question of why audiences identify with the Cactus Jack character over the more physically appealing Triple H. Cactus Jack's appeal to contemporary audiences is a result of more than the official narratives' presentation of his character as a hero, as the meta-narratives of Mick

Foley focus on his years of sacrifice and everyman persona. Rather than being a hero because the WWE tells us so, Cactus Jack is a hero because audiences can identify with his persona. Mick Foley's average looks do not distinguish him from members of the audience, as there is nothing special about his appearance that positions him as separate from wrestling fans. On the other hand, many of the meta-narratives of the Triple H character speculate on his use of chemical enhancement to attain his perfect physique, which makes Foley's body more authentic to wrestling audiences. In addition, Foley's autobiographies (*Have a Nice Day* and *Foley is Good*) both became national best-sellers, and these books depict him as being engaging, approachable, and more human than many of wrestling's larger-than-life characters. Foley's everyman appeal to contemporary wrestling audiences is evidence of a shift in professional wrestling's generic conventions. Wrestling still shares many of the conventions of melodrama, but the Cactus Jack and Triple H characters demonstrate that the roles of these characters are more morally hazy than Barthes and Jenkins describe.

### **The Meta-Narratives of the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble***

In the preceding section I examined the official narratives, or those narratives depicted in the diegesis of professional wrestling. However, these narratives only provide part of the story. The meta-narratives surrounding the participants in the match at the *Royal Rumble* also play a crucial role in how the match was read by wrestling audiences. In this section I will examine the discourses surrounding the participants in the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble*, as well as how those discourses have evolved in the

years since that match. More attention will be paid to the character of Triple H due to his notorious status in the WWE that persists to this day. These meta-narrative serve a complementary function to the official narratives provided by the WWE, creating a richer context for this match and all other matches in the genre of professional wrestling.

The metamorphosis of Mankind to Cactus Jack in the official narrative presented Triple H with a more credible challenger for his championship title at the *Royal Rumble*. However, the meta-narratives of Mick Foley, the wrestler who portrayed these characters, focused more on his imminent retirement rather than the future direction of his character in WWE's official narratives. Foley's body began to break down in the latter half of 1999, and as he describes in *Foley is Good*, he had to think about the quality of his life after his career ended. Throughout his career, Foley was notorious for putting his body through excessive punishment in order to entertain wrestling audiences. In fact, for many wrestling fans Foley is most famous for falling from the top of a fifteen-foot high cage during a match in 1998. Although he has since returned to the WWE, this program with Triple H was to be part of the final series of matches in his career.

The meta-narratives on the Internet surrounding Mick Foley focused on the many sacrifices he'd made throughout his career. Foley's body displayed these sacrifices for all to see, as he had missing teeth, only one of his ears, and scars running up and down his arms. For many wrestling fans, Foley represented someone who loved professional wrestling, and was willing to sacrifice his own body for the enjoyment of wrestling fans. For example, many wrestling fans went to the arenas that housed televised wrestling events bringing signs that proudly read "Foley Is God". The discourses on the Internet tended to focus on the list of memorable matches Foley had in his career, and these

discourses often mentioned the abuse Foley subjected his body to in his matches. For example, a fan with the screen name “Lex Luthor” reviewed a match between Foley and The Undertaker in 1998 where Foley was thrown from the top of a fifteen-foot high cage twice during the match. Luthor states that:

“This match proves how much Foley wants to please the fans. His fall off the cage and his fall through the cage are two of the biggest ‘mark-out’ moments in WWE history”

-Lex Luthor, [www.prowrestlingblog.com/tag/mick-foley-week](http://www.prowrestlingblog.com/tag/mick-foley-week)

In addition, once his first autobiography was released in 1999, many wrestling fans saw Foley as a down-to-earth, regular person. These examples of wrestling fans’ adulation of Mick Foley do not represent a consensus view of the character, however. There were also some wrestling fans who derided Foley as a glorified stuntman, more famous for falling from high places than for any talent displayed in the ring. I will explore the process of taking the temperature of wrestling’s fan community in more detail in the next chapter, but the positive reception of Mick Foley and his wrestling character represents a trend in the discourses surrounding professional wrestling. However, this positive reception of Foley stands in sharp contrast to the vitriol expressed on the Internet about the character of Triple H.

The professional wrestler known as Triple H serves as a perfect case study to demonstrate how the meta-narrative of professional wrestling still incorporates the generic conventions of melodrama in its signifying processes. Triple H is notorious among wrestling audiences for his ubiquity in WWE broadcasts. He is an eleven-time WWE champion and monopolizes the company’s television programs whether he is the champion or not. However, his status at the top of the company’s hierarchy is a cause for

derision in the Internet Wrestling Community because of what is left unsaid in WWE broadcasts. In reality, Triple H is married to the daughter of Vince McMahon, the owner of WWE. This marriage enables Triple H to wield a significant amount of power backstage because of his familial relationship with the McMahon family. In addition, his wife, Stephanie McMahon, is the head writer of the official narratives on WWE broadcasts. Most wrestling fans realize that it is no coincidence that Triple H is the focal point of the entire promotion, appearing in practically all the company's main events and being generally considered internally as the company's biggest star.

Even when another wrestler is granted an opportunity to be the "World Champion," which usually dictates that the company is pushing that wrestler as the top star in the promotion, Triple H manages to manipulate himself into the headlining position on WWE pay-per-view events. For example, in the summer of 2004, the world champion of WWE was a wrestler named Chris Benoit, who happened to be an icon among the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community. Benoit was heralded in the wrestling fan community for his ability as a technical wrestler, as he was considered to be the most skilled wrestler in perhaps the entire world. He had been a professional for eighteen years and had never been granted an opportunity as the top star of any promotion due to his lack of size, as he was under six-feet tall and only 215 pounds. After years of Benoit's entertaining wrestling fans, the company awarded him their top championship to the delight of the wrestling fan community. However, during his run as champion he was a secondary character to Triple H, and at the pay-per-view event known as *Bad Blood* (2004), Triple H competed in the main event instead of Benoit, thus earning a higher

percentage of the show's profits. Not surprisingly, Benoit soon lost the championship to one of Triple H's companions, and the following month the belt went back to Triple H.

So the official representations of Triple H as the top star in WWE are bolstered by the meta-narrative of Triple H as the opportunist who married the boss' daughter to ensure his spot in the company. The meta-narratives of professional wrestling involving Triple H demonstrate elements such as his betrayal of fellow wrestlers for his own benefit, jealousy towards any one who is seen as a bigger star than himself, obsession with being the top star in WWE, revenge on any one who challenges his authority backstage by reducing their role in the company, and so on. In this way, the meta-narratives of Triple H serve as an extension of his character in the official narratives. It is impossible to dissociate the character of Triple H in the official narratives from the negative meta-narratives surrounding the human being (Paul Levesque) that plays the character. This extension of the official narratives in the meta-narratives of wrestling compounds the signifying processes of the Triple H character, but also pigeonholes the character into roles that are consistent with the meta-narratives. It would be difficult for wrestling audiences to view the Triple H character as a hero due to the power of the meta-narratives of his character. As we shall see in chapter three, meta-narratives function independently of the official narratives, but in this example the WWE has chosen to capitalize on the meta-narratives of Triple H by shaping the official narratives to allude to the discourse surrounding the Triple H character. The saga of Triple H as a character on WWE broadcasts and as the human being that stands to inherit the entire company parallels the narrative conventions of melodrama and his textual representation

as the top star in the company is compounded by the meta-narratives in professional wrestling that position him as the ultimate opportunist.

Triple H's villainy is discernable through the combination of his actions within the diegetic world of professional wrestling and the meta-narratives of the genre. For example, Triple H signifies his embodiment of evil in the official texts through his entrance to the ring. He slowly saunters to the ring amid a myriad of spotlights and his entrance music proclaims over the speaker system that it is "Time to Play the Game," alluding to the backstage political battles that characterize his persona. The music softens as he stands on the side of the ring, looking down, and as soon as the song picks up in tempo again he extends his arms in the air and spits water above his head. This act is followed by another burst of spit, this time directed towards the audience and the camera, which cuts to a close-up of Triple H so that the audience on television can see exactly what the character thinks of them.

This example blends elements from the meta-narratives of professional wrestling with the official text, adding layers of meaning to each individual sign. In professional wrestling, any sign with an origin in meta-narratives is referred to as a "shoot". A shoot is any official reflection of the backstage narrative of professional wrestling, and the information on the Internet allows for the audience to detect the presence of shoots in wrestling texts. For example, on an episode of *Monday Night Raw* in October of 2005, Triple H had a verbal confrontation with the current champion of WWE, John Cena. During this confrontation, John Cena remarked to Triple H that if he "wanted some, come get some," which is his popular catchphrase and challenge to any heel in the company. In response, Triple H glanced at his championship belt and responded by saying that,



“When I want it, I’ll come take it”. He then proceeded to provide Cena with a smirk and calmly walked away. This exchange alludes to the meta-narratives surrounding Triple H, as audiences know that he has the political power to undercut Cena’s run at the top of the company whenever he wants, regaining “his” championship whenever the impulse arises. The smirk he gave to Cena was a small gesture that encapsulated his villainous character in both the official and meta-narratives of professional wrestling. This signifier was powerful due to the access of the audience to the meta-narratives of professional wrestling, further solidifying Triple H as the embodiment of villainy.

### **The Semantics and Syntax of Professional Wrestling**

Having identified the existence of meta-narratives in professional wrestling in the previous section, I will now focus on how the generic conventions of professional wrestling are arranged in the context of a wrestling match. The selected match is a Street Fight between Cactus Jack and Triple H, with Cactus Jack playing the role of the heroic babyface and Triple H playing the role of the villainous heel. As I said previously, Triple H defeated Foley’s previous persona of Mankind prior to the match, but the transformation of Foley from Mankind to Cactus Jack signifies an advantage for Foley in the context of a match with no rules. The match’s title, “Street Fight,” signifies to wrestling audiences that the match will contain liberal use of normally forbidden weapons such as chairs in the course of the match. However, this match exceeded these fan expectations by incorporating weaponry previously unseen in WWE matches, such as barbed wire and thumbtacks. As we shall see, these weapons were introduced in the

context of the match for specific purposes, resulting in a match that successfully accomplished the goals of the WWE and met the high expectations of many discerning members of wrestling's fan community.

Before examining how the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* incorporated weaponry to heighten the drama of the match, I would like to examine how wrestling matches employ generically specific maneuvers that defy the logic of traditional competition. For example, in shot twenty-two of the match, Cactus Jack performs a maneuver called a "neckbreaker". A neckbreaker involves grabbing your opponent by the head, twisting yourself and your opponent simultaneously, and dropping down so that the opponent lands on their head and neck. A critic not familiar with professional wrestling's generic conventions could ask why Foley would perform such a complicated maneuver when a simple punch in the face (as seen in boxing) would suffice. The choice to use this sort of wrestling hold is made from a range of choices available to any given performer as defined by the genre's conventions. Over the years each professional wrestler develops an extensive repertoire of wrestling holds that he chooses from in the course of a match. The neckbreaker signifies to the audience a traditional wrestling hold, as the move originated in the 1970s and was employed by wrestlers such as Giant Baba and Johnny Valiant. The neckbreaker falls into the category of recognizable wrestling holds that audiences see executed in many wrestling matches, making it instantly recognizable as an attempt to "wear down" the opponent. This move parallels numerous wrestling maneuvers, such as a "sleeper" hold, an "atomic drop, and so on, that in previous decades were used as finishers but today serve as indicators of traditional wrestling tactics. As we shall see, finishing maneuvers such as The Pedigree signify to

audiences the execution of a more powerful maneuver, one that could potentially conclude the match.

The Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack features many traditional wrestling holds such as a neckbreaker, but the match also contains a tremendous amount of hardcore weaponry used to bloody and torture the participants. For example, in shot seventy-two of the match, Cactus Jack pulls a piece of wood wrapped in barbed wire from under the ring and holds it up for the crowd to witness. The inclusion of such a weapon in a traditional wrestling match would normally be illegal and confusing to the audience, but in the context of a Street Fight it is entirely within the audience's horizon of expectations. The use of this weapon signifies that this is no normal match, as the stakes are raised for the participants in the contest. The inclusion of a barbed wire board represents a semantic choice made by Cactus Jack and Triple H, as they attempt to draw the audience into the spectacle of the Street Fight. The sequence that follows with the barbed wire board demonstrates how choices such as these are arranged in the context of a wrestling match — the genre's syntax.

Although Cactus Jack retrieves the weapon from under the ring, Triple H quickly steals it away and hits Cactus Jack across the back. This action allows for Cactus Jack's shirt to get caught in the barbed wire, providing a gruesome visual even though the audience never witnesses the weapon contact Cactus Jack's skin. Cactus Jack's failure to hit the villainous Triple H with the weapon, even though he was the one who introduced it, builds the audience's anticipation of Triple H receiving his comeuppance. The board is momentarily removed from the match by the referee (to a chorus of boos from the crowd), until Cactus Jack finally retrieves the weapon and punishes Triple H with it. The

delay in giving the audience the desired result, which is Triple H being bloodied with barbed wire for the first time in his career, increases the audience's anticipation, making the payoff to this sequence greater than if it had happened immediately. Many in the audience expected Cactus Jack to be tortured, as he has the scars on his body as evidence that he is used to this type of match, but for a period in the match the audience feared that Triple H would not receive a similar fate.

This sequence represents an arrangement of individual signs within the context of the match, or the match's syntax. Wrestling matches are constructed in a manner to maximize audience response to individual maneuvers, and this example demonstrates how two experienced wrestlers arrange the individual signifiers in a match in a specific order designed to draw the audience into the contest. The performers delayed the payoff for the villain for several minutes, heightening the impact of the sign of Triple H finally meeting the barbed wire.

The Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack incorporated signs that had connotations from previous events in the diegetic universe of the WWE as well. During the match, Triple H produces a pair of handcuffs and traps Cactus Jack's arms behind his back. This sign has significant connotations already, such as Cactus Jack is in extreme danger due to his inability to defend himself. However, for many wrestling fans this sign has even deeper levels of connotation. The previous year's *Royal Rumble* event featured a match between Mick Foley (as the character of Mankind) facing The Rock in a match where the only way to win was to say "I Quit". Late in the match, The Rock handcuffed Foley's arms behind his back and proceeded to brutally smash him in the head with a chair eleven times. When Triple H applied the handcuffs in the Street Fight and

subsequently produced a chair, the moment immediately evoked the events from the match one year earlier. These connotations heightened the drama in the Street Fight, and it was accomplished by simply producing a sign that the wrestlers knew had brutal connotations for wrestling fans.

In addition to the sign of the handcuffs containing connotations from past events in wrestling's diegesis, the sign of a finishing maneuver also builds on the knowledge amassed by wrestling fans. I have mentioned the role of finishers already in this analysis, but to clarify, a finisher is a particular wrestling maneuver that characters employ to signify that a match is about to conclude. These holds are seen as more devastating than traditional wrestling maneuvers, as the wrestler has a history of employing the maneuver to win matches. The more often a wrestler concludes a match with his particular finisher, the more devastating the audience views the hold. Triple H's finisher, The Pedigree, is generally regarded as one of professional wrestling's most powerful finishers since Triple H uses it to win practically all of his matches. The Pedigree involves placing the opponent's head between your legs, holding the opponents arms behind their back, and jumping in the air so that the opponent's face crashes to the mat. The inability of the wrestler to use his arms to brace his fall makes the maneuver an impressive visual, and Triple H's privileged position in the company translates to most of his matches ending with The Pedigree.

The Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack employed the signifying processes of finishers at the conclusion of the match. After almost thirty minutes, Triple H finally caught Cactus Jack in The Pedigree, signifying to the crowd that the match is over. However, before the referee could reach the count of three, Cactus Jack raised his

shoulder from the canvas, escaping what appeared like certain defeat. At this point in the match, the crowd erupted in an enormous cheer, as even Triple H's finisher could not stop Cactus Jack. Triple H acknowledged this cheer by flopping his arms up and down and complaining to the referee, as he was certain that this was the end. With the crowd buzzing as Cactus Jack rose to his feet, Triple H captured him in a second Pedigree. This time, Triple H executed his finisher over hundreds of thumbtacks, driving Cactus Jack's face and body into the tacks. This proved to be the conclusion of the match, as Triple H scored the three count and defeated Cactus Jack in a match that the official narratives proclaimed favored Cactus Jack. Triple H employed the signifiers of both his finisher and the thumbtacks, and the signified of this combination was that Cactus Jack had endured too much punishment to continue in the match.

### **The Outcome of the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble***

The Street Fight between Triple H and Cactus Jack serves as an example of a wrestling match successfully accomplishing a number of goals. The WWE in 2000 was without two of its biggest stars, as "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and The Undertaker were lost to injury late in 1999. The company had a successful babyface star in The Rock, and the company planned to build around him in the coming year. The plan, as reported in wrestling industry journals such as *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and on the Internet, was for The Rock to defeat Triple H for the championship belt at the company's biggest annual event, *WrestleMania*. In order for this victory to resonate with wrestling audiences, the WWE wanted the Triple H character to be seen as a legitimate competitor.

The more powerful that Triple H appeared, the greater the impact of The Rock finally defeating him for the company's top title. The Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* assisted in this legitimization of Triple H, as he defeated Cactus Jack in a match in which the official narrative labeled him an underdog. In the meta-narrative of the match, fans were so caught up in the drama of the match that many proclaimed it as one of the best matches in WWE history. The Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* helped solidify Triple H's position at the top of the company hierarchy, a position he has since refused to vacate due to his relationship with the McMahon family.

The Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* also illuminates the meta-narratives of professional wrestling. The match occurred at a time when the Internet provided access to these meta-narratives that have always existed in the genre, but until recently have remained largely inaccessible to most wrestling fans. The discourses surrounding the match and its participants, most notable Triple H, demonstrate the complex reading processes of professional wrestling's fan community. It is not sufficient to just examine the official narratives of wrestling texts, as these narratives only provide part of the match's context. The signs employed in the match have added levels of meaning when understood in the context of both official and meta-narratives. This chapter has focused on illuminating these meta-narratives in order to understand the complex reading processes of professional wrestling's audience. In addition, I have focused on the genre's semantics and syntax in order to produce a comprehensive analysis of the genre. In the next chapter, I will shift my focus to what Altman (1999) calls audience pragmatics. The next chapter will examine how audiences both read and impact the creation of official

texts, exemplifying the model of the productive audience introduced in chapter one of this analysis.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Wrestling Control from Official Media Producers: Randy Orton and the Productive Audience**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I examined the semantics and syntax of professional wrestling's generic conventions, positing that the reading processes of wrestling audiences are much more complex than previously imagined. The complexity of wrestling fans' reading processes resides in the audience's use of both the official narratives of media producers and the meta-narratives that exist outside of wrestling's diegesis to contextualize wrestling texts. It is the combination of these two narrative systems that comprehensively accounts for how audiences consume wrestling texts. However, the identification of meta-narratives in professional wrestling does not explain how audiences can impact the official media producers and blur the boundaries between textual producers and consumers. In order to identify how wrestling fans demonstrate the characteristics of the productive audience model described in chapter one, this chapter will examine the official and meta-narratives surrounding the wrestling character of Randy Orton. As we shall see, the field of "star studies" proves particularly useful for an

analysis of this kind, as I will examine how wrestling audiences assumed the position of textual producers in the rejection of Randy Orton's star image. This rejection serves as a perfect example of the productive audience model, as audiences used the official and meta-narratives of Randy Orton to dictate the narrative direction of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE).

Scholarly work on the phenomenon of stardom tends to rely on the examination of successful star images, exploring the industrial and social mechanisms that yield particular stars. Analyses of this sort are often limited, however, by the implication that the star-making industry is the central force in the creation of stardom, failing to account for the role of the audience in the creation, or destruction, of star images. This analysis will examine the failure of official media producers to dictate how audiences should read media texts and images, focusing on the wrestling audience's refusal to blindly accept Randy Orton as the top star of WWE. Borrowing from the framework espoused by Richard Dyer (1979), this analysis will explore Orton's star image from both a semiotic and sociological approach, illustrating the industrial attempts to manufacture the Orton character's ascension into professional wrestling's hierarchy of performers. In addition, this analysis will balance the aforementioned industrial approach with Rick Altman's (1999) notion of audience pragmatics, focusing on how audiences use the official and meta-narratives of Randy Orton when making judgments over the future direction of both his star image and the direction of WWE texts. Ultimately, the rejection of Randy Orton's star image and the direction of WWE official narratives demonstrates a need for a new model for conceptualizing audiences in communication scholarship, a model that I have called the productive audience.

The career path of Randy Orton from December 2003 through January 2005 serves as a perfect case study of the limitations of the media industry's capacity to manufacture stars and demand audience capitulation. These limitations highlight the need to emphasize the audience's role in the creation of star images. I selected the parameters of this study because within the span of fourteen months Randy Orton was pushed by the WWE as the future of professional wrestling, and was later abandoned by the same company due to the audience's rejection of his character. In this example, the audience of professional wrestling assumed the position of the official media producers and altered the official narratives of the WWE. Through an analysis of critical mistakes (according to wrestling audiences) made in the official narratives and the meta-narratives that contextualized the Orton character, this study will position the audience as a crucial component of star creation and textual production that is often underestimated by media industries and critical scholars.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In *Stars*, Richard Dyer (1979) proposes a framework for examining stars from both a semiotic and sociological perspective. A semiotic approach to studying stars centers on the analysis of the media texts that feature specific stars. This approach posits that the signifying processes of stars can best be understood from their textual representations. For example, Dyer examines the star image of John Wayne by analyzing how the performance of the actor in the film *Fort Apache* contributes to his star image. Dyer contends that the fluid movement of the John Wayne character in the saddle of his

horse demonstrates his “total-at-home-ness” in the diegetic frontiers of the film (p. 145). The semiotic component of Dyer’s framework focuses on the official narratives of textual producers in the analysis of star images, and this component must be balanced with what Dyer calls a sociological approach when examining stars.

A sociological approach to investigating stardom involves the analysis of the industrial aspects to stardom, including the promotion and publicity of the star image by the official media producers. Promotion refers to the public appearances and interviews of the star, which are organized by the entertainment industry. Similarly, publicity refers to the social discourses and narratives about the star that are circulated in the culture, often by the official media producers themselves. This distinction is crucial when discussing the meta-narratives identified earlier in this analysis. Meta-narratives mirror Dyer’s notion of publicity in that these narratives exist independently of the texts created by official media producers. However, Dyer’s crucial distinction that publicity often originates from the official media producers complicates the legitimacy of many of the meta-narratives of professional wrestling. It is undeniable that official media producers both author some meta-narratives themselves and incorporate many meta-narratives into the official narratives of media texts. For example, the company website for WWE often offers stories about its performers independent of the televised texts. Due to their acknowledgement by WWE, these narratives become part of the official narratives of WWE texts, existing in the diegetic universe of the company. However, it is impossible for the WWE to control every aspect of these meta-narratives, and many independent and fan-produced websites offer narratives outside of the official media producers’ control. This distinction will be explored further in the conclusion of this analysis.

The combination of Dyer's semiotic and sociological approaches provides a framework for studying stars that comprehensively accounts for the industrially regulated images and discourses surrounding star images. However, this framework does not adequately account for the role of the audience in the formation and proliferation of star images. I propose that Dyer's framework be balanced with what Rick Altman (1999) calls audience pragmatics. Altman coins this phrase for the purpose of studying film genres, but it is applicable to this analysis of stars as well. Both genres and stars communicate with audiences a set of expectations, or an aesthetic contract, for particular media texts. Altman argues that it is not sufficient to examine film genres without considering how audiences use genres, and he balances his semantic/syntactic approach with a pragmatic component. Similarly, Dyer's framework for studying stars does not adequately account for audiences' varying uses of star images, nor does it account for the impact an audience has on the success or failure of star images. This analysis will examine the star image of Randy Orton from an amalgamation of Dyer and Altman's perspectives in order to gain a comprehensive analysis of how audiences can blur the boundaries between textual producers and consumers.

### **Professional Wrestling and Star Images**

Professional wrestling provides a unique opportunity for examining the phenomenon of stardom because of its generic hybridity. The genre is an amalgamation of both melodrama and competitive sport, drawing from the industrial practices of both sources to create its stars. In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner (2004)

distinguishes the differences between Hollywood stars and sports stars. Turner states that sports stars are unique in that, “sport is one of the few areas of public life that is truly meritocratic; sports stars can prove they are the best...further, sports stars perform unequivocally as themselves”(p. 19). The genre of professional wrestling complicates these distinctions, however, because of its scripted nature. Professional wrestling provides the illusion of competition through the staging of wrestling matches, but the participants are in actuality working collectively to produce the spectacle.

However, this distinction is much more complex in that there is a meritocratic component to the spectacle. Wrestlers are often rewarded from their employers for the quality of their matches, or how well they mask the artifice of the scripted competition. The quality of a wrestler’s matches plays an important role in the company “push” of his character, impacting his placement in the company and potential monetary compensation. For example, a wrestler that is awarded a championship belt subsequently competes in the main events of particular wrestling shows, receiving a larger percentage of the capital the show generates. Of course, there have been many instances of wrestlers receiving substantial pushes that are accused of having limited wrestling skill. Hulk Hogan in the 1980s and John Cena today serve as examples of heavily pushed wrestlers with limited wrestling skill. The case of Hulk Hogan demonstrates a shift in the genre since his immense popularity in the 1980s, as the access to meta-narratives was severely limited prior to the rise of the Internet. His occasional appearances still garner a positive reaction, but I would argue that this is more for nostalgia than for any recent accomplishments in wrestling’s diegesis. The example of John Cena mirrors the following analysis of Randy Orton in that the company’s push of the Cena character has

produced significant tension between WWE and wrestling's fan community. Future research could examine his star image and follow a similar trajectory as the star image of Randy Orton.

Professional wrestling complicates the distinction made by Turner between Hollywood and sports stars in that wrestlers do not play themselves on wrestling broadcasts but often play only one character for the duration of their careers. The line between character and actor is blurred in the wrestling genre to a greater degree than most Hollywood stars. Randy Orton, among various other characters, complicates this distinction further by using his actual name as the name for his wrestling character. Professional wrestling's blurring of the boundaries between Hollywood and sport serves as a perfect case study because it draws from the star-making processes of both industries. It is this combination of star-making processes that will be examined through the star image of Randy Orton, highlighting the failure of the media industry to dictate to audiences who is in fact a star.

### **The Star Image of Randy Orton**

The focus of this analysis is on the career of professional wrestler Randy Orton over a fourteen-month span between December 2003 and January 2005. It is during this time that the promotional machine of WWE put its focus on Orton and thrust him towards the top of the wrestling industry, only to see him fail to connect with audiences. However, there are several important facets of the Orton star image that have origins outside of these parameters that merit discussion before proceeding with this analysis.

Randy Orton is the son of former WWE wrestler “Cowboy” Bob Orton, who wrestled in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, Randy Orton is the grandson of Bob Orton Sr., another legendary performer who wrestled professionally in the 1950s and 1960s. Randy Orton’s heritage afforded him tremendous access to the wrestling business, as he was known by wrestling promoters from the time of his birth. He signed with the WWE in 2001 at the age of twenty-one, which is very young in relation to the ages of most professional wrestlers in the WWE. Orton proceeded to work on his craft in the company’s developmental wrestling organization, Ohio Valley Wrestling, until being brought to WWE broadcasts in 2002. Randy Orton’s status as a third-generation wrestler automatically put him in elite company, as the only previous third-generation performer in the WWE was The Rock, one of the biggest stars in the history of professional wrestling.

Orton’s lineage, history with the wrestling industry, and young age all contributed to his being tabbed as “the future of the WWE”(Burkett, Welsh, Murphy, & Krewda, 2004). In addition, Randy Orton’s body was an important factor to his status as a rising star in the company. At 6’4” and over 250 pounds, Orton was large enough to be considered a top talent in the WWE, a company that notoriously covets size in their performers. Orton also possessed traditionally handsome facial features to go along with his impressive physique, and these physical attributes would play a crucial role in the character he portrayed on WWE broadcasts.

Shortly after Orton’s introduction to WWE audiences, he was placed in a faction entitled “Evolution”. The WWE chose to portray Orton as a heel, or villain, because of the previously mentioned hereditary and physical factors. This portrayal of Randy Orton



as a heel proved wise for the WWE, as the many smarks (and to a lesser extent smarts) that make up the audience of professional wrestling knew of Orton's history and heritage. These fans were aware of Orton's status as the future of the WWE before he even debuted for the company. The WWE subsequently acknowledged this information by incorporating it into Orton's heel character.

Randy Orton's character was portrayed as an arrogant villain, fully aware of his superior physical attributes and privileged position in the company. For example, his cocky persona is displayed through his ring entrance as he ascends the turnbuckle post in the corner of the wrestling ring. From this lofty perch, Orton opens his arms wide, revealing his sculpted physique. He subsequently turns his head to the side and smirks, signifying his own cognition of his exalted status within the company. This display encapsulates his heel persona of being superior to both fellow performers and the members of the audience, as if he was selected for this position from birth.

As I mentioned above, Randy Orton was included in the heel faction Evolution. His inclusion in this group is significant in that it provided an opportunity for him to perfect this image through association with other villains in the company. The group consisted of Ric Flair, a legendary wrestler with over thirty years experience, Triple H, the most notorious heel in the company in both the official and meta-narratives of professional wrestling, and Batista, another newcomer to the WWE who was to benefit through his association with the veterans of the group. The dynamic of this heel faction was that Flair represented the most dominant wrestler in the past, Triple H represented the most dominant wrestler in the present, and Orton was to represent the future of professional wrestling. Batista was relegated to "enforcer" status, and the evolution of

Orton's star image is intrinsically tied to his involvement with the Evolution faction.

From December 2003 through January 2005, Orton would rise to the top of the wrestling industry and fall from that lofty position through the efforts of both Evolution and the wrestling audience.

### **Randy Orton as Product of Official Media Producers**

The WWE staged a pay-per-view event entitled *Armageddon* on December 14, 2003. This event is a significant starting point for an analysis of Randy Orton's star image because it marks the beginning of his ascension to the top of the wrestling industry and the cementing of Evolution as the dominant force of WWE broadcasts. At this event, Randy Orton won the Inter-Continental Championship, which is a secondary title in the company, from wrestler Rob Van Dam. This championship is used historically to help elevate young wrestlers in the minds of wrestling audiences, signifying that the company has big plans for this wrestler in the future. For example, wrestlers such as Randy "Macho Man" Savage in the 1980s and Triple H in the 1990s were awarded this title shortly before being positioned in the main events of WWE broadcasts. At the same pay-per-view event, Triple H regained his World Heavyweight Championship title and Ric Flair and Batista won the WWE Tag Team Championship. Over the course of this three-hour broadcast, every member of Evolution emerged victorious and controlled every title the company featured in WWE programs. The concluding shot of the event featured all four members of this faction celebrating with their respective championship belts. The

WWE was putting their promotional machine behind this group of performers, who encapsulated the past, present, and future of professional wrestling.

Randy Orton's star image in the months following the *Armageddon* pay-per-view event involved him entering into an angle, or narrative storyline, with legendary wrestler Mick Foley, Triple H's opponent in the match examined in the previous chapter. Foley's matches with Triple H were instrumental in Triple H earning the respect of wrestling audiences in the infancy of his push as the biggest heel in the WWE. During these encounters, Foley used a menagerie of weapons on the rising star, and Triple H's willingness to sacrifice his own body and be bloodied with barbed wire and steel chairs managed to solidify his status as an authentic, main event level wrestler. Now, four years later, Foley was being asked by the WWE to come out of retirement and do the same for young Randy Orton.

The early stages of the feud between Randy Orton and Mick Foley featured the cocky, arrogant Orton attempting to coax the legend out of retirement. Dubbing himself "The Legend Killer," Orton would boast in the official narratives of the WWE that he had no respect for Foley's past accomplishments or his legendary status. Each week on *Monday Night Raw*, WWE's weekly cable program, Orton would challenge Foley to face him in a wrestling ring, and Foley (who did appear in the broadcasts, signifying that he was no longer retired) would decline. These exchanges built towards the 2004 version of the *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view event, which was held on January 24, 2004. The royal rumble match itself featured thirty wrestlers entering the ring in ninety-second intervals, and the object of the match was to throw all of your opponents over the ropes and to the floor. Orton was the second participant in the match, and proceeded to eliminate all of

the subsequent entrants until number twenty-one. Number twenty-one happened to be the now un-retired Mick Foley, and the two wrestlers fell from the ring together and battled to the dressing room. This event is significant in that Orton was allowed to last a long period of time in the match, furthering his status as a rising star. In addition, the match furthered his feud with Mick Foley, and this feud would prove to be the catalyst for his acceptance by the wrestling fan community, just as it was for Triple H four years earlier.

The feud between Orton and Foley continued for two more months after their encounter at the *Royal Rumble* event. At *WrestleMania XX*, which was held on March 14, 2004, Orton joined his Evolution teammates Ric Flair and Batista to battle Mick Foley and The Rock. This match featured both of the third-generation wrestlers in the WWE, and marked The Rock's last match with the company before leaving for Hollywood stardom. In addition, Orton scored the decisive pinfall victory over his nemesis, Mick Foley, setting the stage for a final encounter between the two. The match was scheduled for the following pay-per-view event entitled *Backlash*, which was held on April 18, 2004. This match was to be contested under "hardcore" rules, which translates to the same type of match Foley had with Triple H in the Street Fight at the *Royal Rumble* in 2000. The WWE hoped the results of this match would replicate the results of the Street Fight, solidifying Orton's status as a legitimate main event wrestler. What occurred between the two performers at *Backlash* ended up exceeding many within WWE's and the audience's wildest expectations.

At *Backlash*, Randy Orton and Mick Foley proceeded to bludgeon each other with numerous weapons while also conveying a compelling narrative of a young, arrogant

wrestler trying to build his name through the destruction of an established veteran in the veteran's preferred environment. Paralleling the match between Foley and Triple H, Orton had no previous experience in hardcore matches, but he managed to pull off a violent spectacle to the delight of the live audience and the fans watching on pay-per-view. Many wrestling fans on Internet websites specifically mentioned Orton being plunged into a scattering of thumbtacks with no protection on his back (such as a T-shirt) as the highlight of the match. The chiseled, perfect body described previously became littered with thumbtacks sticking into his back, legs, and shoulders. The match authenticated Orton's position in the company to discerning wrestling audiences, as Orton proved that he would sacrifice his own body for the sake of entertaining the fans. In a review of the match on the wrestling website [www.wrestling.insidepulse.com](http://www.wrestling.insidepulse.com), Scott Keith exclaims that, "The tacks are everywhere, stuck into Orton's hand and back...Orton was over big time with the crowd after that...a great coming out party for Orton"(2004). Many fans conveyed a similar opinion in Internet discussion boards after the match:

"Foley/Orton was great. This is the match that will go down in history as making Randy Orton"

-Al Cotton, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

"This was Orton's breakout singles match, and Orton took bumps that Foley's old opponents never did."

-David, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

"I have renewed respect for Orton and he was definitely elevated during this match...Orton not only took the thumbtacks but three major bumps afterwards with the tacks lodged into his back. My hat's off to Orton."

-Ted, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

These responses indicate that the promotion of Randy Orton as a rising star was given credence due to his representations in the official narratives of the WWE.

Randy Orton's feud with Mick Foley illustrates the complex relationship between textual representations of stardom and audience pragmatics. Prior to April 18, 2004, Randy Orton was promoted as a star in WWE texts. His acquisition of the Inter-Continental Championship, his performance at the *Royal Rumble*, and his victory at *WrestleMania XX* all demonstrate the ways that the WWE depicted him as a star. In addition to these textual depictions, Orton was deemed a rising star by the industrially regulated promotion and publicity of the WWE. For example, Randy Orton was featured prominently on [www.wwe.com](http://www.wwe.com) during his feud with Foley discussing how he was going to destroy the legend of Mick Foley. These industrially regulated sources are limited, however, in that Orton was appearing in "kayfabe," or consistent with his character in the official texts of the WWE. These sources do not adequately characterize the meta-narratives surrounding the Orton character, which points to the complex nature of analyzing the genre of professional wrestling.

On the other hand, fan discourses serve as a tremendous resource for analyzing Orton's star image, necessitating the need for the inclusion of audience pragmatics in star studies. Orton's feud with Foley, and in particular their match at *Backlash*, stands as the distinct moment when audiences accepted Orton as being deserving of his promotion. He earned his star image through his sacrifice at *Backlash* and was subsequently viewed as being more authentic by wrestling audiences. However, it is important to note that the fan community of professional wrestling is not a monolithic, univocal entity. There were many fans who decried Orton's position even after his feud with Foley, and some derided the match itself for being too reliant on gimmickry. Rather than chronicling every fan response of Orton's star image and matches, which would be impossible, I have provided

examples of fan discourse that represent the majority of audience responses in specific temporal moments. At no point were wrestling audiences unanimous in their opinions of Orton's star image. Instead, I have identified trends in fan discourses surrounding the Orton character that have a direct impact on the official narratives of the WWE.

In the months following his feud with Mick Foley, Randy Orton lost the Inter-Continental Championship to the wrestler known as Edge, but this fact only set the stage for his career highlight in August 2004. During the month of August, Orton won a match that qualified him for a shot at the World Champion, Chris Benoit, at the next pay-per-view event. Benoit won the title from Orton's stable-mate Triple H in March at *WrestleMania XX*, and in the following months Triple H became obsessed with regaining his championship. Rather than having another match between Benoit and Triple H, the WWE decided to showcase their young, rising star at *Summerslam*, which is notoriously the company's second-largest event of the year. Orton had been receiving noticeable reactions from fans at WWE events since his feud with Foley, and the WWE decided that the audience viewed Orton as a big enough star to perform in the main event of this huge pay-per-view event. In addition, the WWE had additional motives for pushing Orton so rapidly to the top of the company. There was a dearth of top stars in the company at this time, as The Rock had departed for a career in Hollywood and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin had recently retired. There was pressure to usher in the next generation of stars, and Randy Orton was seen as the frontrunner.

In addition, the WWE had recently lost the services of one of its other young, rising stars several months earlier when Brock Lesnar quit the company to pursue a career in football. Lesnar was pushed very hard by the company in 2002, and was

recognized as the youngest World Champion in the history of the WWE. Since he was no longer affiliated with the company, the WWE was desperate to shift this distinction to one of their contracted performers, and it just so happened that Randy Orton was a year younger than Lesnar when he won the championship. The choice was made by WWE to award the World Championship to Randy Orton, and at *Summerslam* on August 15, 2004, Randy Orton defeated Chris Benoit to win the crowning achievement in the professional wrestling industry.

From an industrial standpoint, Orton's victory at *Summerslam* made him the biggest star in the WWE. However, when examining the fan discourses surrounding Orton's star image, his title victory did not necessarily validate his status as the company's top star. The following quotations serve as examples of the majority opinions of wrestling fans in the IWC:

“Too early for Orton in my opinion, but I loved the match and finish.”

-Erin Beverly, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

“Orton held up his end, although I wouldn't pull the trigger this early on the Orton face turn. It'll be interesting to see what happens on *Raw* tonight.”

-David Wolf, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

These comments illustrate how there is a disparity between Orton's textual representations and the audience's perception of his star image. The common theme among the feedback on Orton's victory was that it was too early, especially within the context of the larger official narrative the company had constructed. This victory expedited the unavoidable conflict between Orton and his mentor, Triple H. This was the match wrestling audiences had anticipated since the inception of the Evolution faction, and the match the WWE had hoped would headline their biggest show year, *WrestleMania 21* (Meltzer, 2005). As David Wold stated in his feedback to the



*Summerslam* pay-per-view event, “It’ll be interesting to see what happens on *Raw* tonight.” Indeed it was, because on August 16, 2004, Evolution and wrestling’s audience began the demolition of Randy Orton’s star image.

### **Randy Orton as a Product of the Productive Audience**

Through this point in Randy Orton’s career, the industrial processes involved in the creation of Orton’s star image and the audience’s reception of that image had worked in relative harmony. Although the wrestling audiences did not immediately recognize Orton as a star, his representation in the official narratives and texts, his industrial promotion, and his wrestling ability all contributed to audiences recognizing him as a rising star in the wrestling industry. As discussed previously, it was not until Orton was considered authentic, or deserving of his position, that audiences accepted him. As Dyer would say, Orton was “nominated” by the wrestling industry, and he had to earn that nomination before being elected by the discerning fan community. However, it is at this point in Orton’s career that the wrestling audience began to assert their power over the official textual producers by rejecting Orton’s star image.

The heel faction Evolution was created to help Randy Orton and Batista, two young wrestlers that audiences had little reason to care about, connect with wrestling fans and position them as future stars. Orton in particular was recognized as the future of professional wrestling from the group’s inception, while Triple H was portrayed as the present of professional wrestling. Logic dictates that at some point, the future will manifest itself and replace the present, ushering in a new era of professional wrestling.

Many members of the Internet Wrestling Community understood that at some point Randy Orton would stand up to Triple H, distance himself from the evil faction, and vanquish his mentor. This narrative would establish Orton as the top babyface (hero) in the WWE for defeating the hated Triple H. This inevitable confrontation had been predicted to occur on the company's grandest stage, *WrestleMania 21* (Meltzer, 2005). On this night, it was assumed that the torch would be passed to Randy Orton from Triple H, and the IWC was eager to see how this narrative would play out in WWE broadcasts. This context makes what happened the night after Orton's victory at *Summerslam* so perplexing and demonstrates the inability of textual producers to simply dictate to audiences what they should and should not accept.

The *Monday Night Raw* on August 16, 2004 is more significant to Randy Orton's career than his victory over Chris Benoit, but for a vastly different reason. That night, after Orton defeated Benoit in a rematch for the World Championship, all the members of Evolution gathered in the ring to celebrate the accomplishments of Randy Orton. Batista hoisted Orton onto his shoulders as Ric Flair and Triple H applauded in the background. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Triple H, who gives Orton a "Thumbs Up" gesture. There is a reaction shot of Orton immediately following this gesture, and then another close-up of Triple H. At this moment, Triple H's thumb reverses itself and points toward the mat, and his approving smile is replaced with a sinister scowl. On cue, Batista immediately dumps Orton to the mat as Evolution viciously attacks their former comrade. This sequence ushers in the feud between Randy Orton and his former associates, particularly Triple H. The long-term effects of this narrative would prove disastrous for Orton's star image and the direction of the company as a whole. The match between

Orton and Triple H, which was supposed to occur at *WrestleMania 21*, was hurriedly scheduled to take place at the next pay-per-view event entitled *Unforgiven* on September 12, 2004, a full seven months before *WrestleMania 21*. At *Unforgiven*, Triple H defeated Randy Orton for the World Championship with the assistance from his teammates in Evolution, “ending the biggest booking debacle” in the recent history of professional wrestling (Alvarez, 2004).

The reason for many fans’ derision of the feud between Randy Orton and Triple H highlights the failure of the WWE to construct both an engaging narrative and a successful star image. First of all, many fans criticized the feud because it happened entirely too fast. Numerous Internet discussion boards on professional wrestling featured posts that criticized the WWE for not teasing the match between Orton and Triple H for months, which would have built the anticipation to see these two performers collide on the biggest show of the year. Instead, the August 16, 2004 edition of *Monday Night Raw* rushed through months of potential programming in the span of ten minutes. Todd Martin, who composes the weekly recaps of *Monday Night Raw* for [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com), echoes these sentiments by writing that:

“They ran a promotional video for Orton-Triple H at *Unforgiven*. I am in complete disbelief they are going to this already. It is a move of shockingly incomprehensible desperation. The angle moved between five and ten times faster than it should have. The booking in general is just horrible.”

-Todd Martin, [www.wrestlingobserver.com](http://www.wrestlingobserver.com)

As we shall see, the WWE infuriated wrestling fans for deeper reasons than a clumsily produced official narrative. In fact, much of the hostility in the IWC was directed at the WWE rather than the Randy Orton character. In one night, the company rushed into the biggest feud in their repertoire, and the characters were given no time to hint at potential

dissension within the Evolution faction. Numerous wrestling fans argued that while it is logical that Triple H would be jealous of Randy Orton's success, this narrative should have been explored over many months. The WWE did not allow the audience an opportunity to anticipate the match, instead providing the match before many were ready. Bryan Alvarez, a writer for the wrestling publication *Figure Four Weekly*, summarizes what many wrestling fans argued by writing:

“They went with an idea that even the dumbest fan couldn't have conceived. They rushed the World Title onto Orton, they rushed his babyface turn, they rushed his departure from Evolution, and then they rushed the supposed *WrestleMania* match seven months early. So in the course of one month-**30 DAYS**-Orton has won the title, been booted from Evolution, flopped as a face and lost the belt. Brilliant”(Alvarez, 2004).

In addition to rushing the company's biggest match of the year, the WWE also provided no reason for audiences to identify with Randy Orton, which upset fans because it took their loyalty for granted. The most successful wrestling babyfaces, or heroes, have always connected with audiences in ways that encourages audience support. For example, Mick Foley is respected by many wrestling fans because of his years of sacrifice around the world prior to his position in the WWE. Randy Orton, on the other hand, provided little reason for audiences to support him. Orton never stood up to Triple H or Evolution, as he was the one dumped by Evolution rather than embracing more heroic character traits and forcing the split himself. Had the narrative progressed at a slower pace, perhaps Orton could have demonstrated a more heroic side to his star image. Unfortunately, Orton never behaved any differently than when he was a cocky, arrogant heel until the week after Evolution turned on him. Prior to Orton's victory at *Summerslam*, he was receiving some support from live audiences. The WWE assumed that the wrestling fan community was ready to get behind Orton, failing to account for

other factors that may have led to this show of support. For example, Orton was greeted with extensive cheers immediately following his match with Mick Foley as a show of appreciation for his hard work. Rather than assuming that audiences would cheer for Orton because they were supposed to, many wrestling fans claimed that the WWE should have allowed those cheers to grow over a period of time, assisted by the teasing of a confrontation between Orton and the loathed Triple H.

The WWE's assumption that wrestling audiences would accept Randy Orton as the new face of the company demonstrates a power struggle between the WWE and wrestling fans. Wrestling fans resisted the Orton character as a heroic babyface because they were told by the WWE to accept him regardless of whether audiences believed Orton deserved the position. The rushing of Randy Orton's official narrative took the audience's loyalty for granted, assuming the fans would accept him without fully proving himself to them. This disregard for audience desires is the fundamental reason for the backlash against the Orton character and the WWE, as wrestling fans rebelled against the company and attempted to communicate their displeasure. The WWE violated the aesthetic contract it has with its audience, and the audience subsequently assumed the position of textual producers by instigating a change in the official narratives.

This consternation in the fan community of professional wrestling is an indicative feature of the productive audience model. Fan discourses on the Internet depicted significant dissatisfaction with the official narratives of the WWE, and the effects began seeping into the official media texts. As we will see, the next few months of Orton's career were marked by a disconnect between the official media producers and the audience's reception of the official narratives. The reaction of the live audience to the

Orton character was often one of apathy rather than support, as audiences began to force the hand of the WWE in an attempt to encourage official narratives that met their expectations. The WWE constructed an official narrative designed to take the company through *WrestleMania 21* in April, 2005, but wrestling audiences caused a change in this plan and by January, 2005, the narrative was dropped in favor of a direction dictated by the audience.

The failure of Orton's star image to connect with wrestling audiences haunted his feud with Evolution over the following months. In October, Orton defeated Ric Flair in a match staged inside of a cage, and in November Orton captained a team of babyface wrestlers against Triple H's team of villains. In this match, Orton pinned Triple H to earn his team's victory in the main event, demonstrating that in the official WWE narratives he could compete with his former mentor. However, this semiotic perspective does not account for audiences refusing to accept Orton as the top star in WWE. Orton was promoted as a top star by the WWE, earning wins over Flair and Triple H in subsequent pay-per-view main events, but textual representations only tell part of the story. The meta-narratives surrounding Randy Orton focused on his failure as the company's top star, disregarding any victories he accumulated in the official WWE narratives. For example, one fan contributed a review of a non-televised event from the United Kingdom in October, 2004 where Triple H defeated Orton in the main event. The fan's report was relayed to Bryan Alvarez and summarized in *Figure Four Weekly*. Alvarez reports that, "Triple H beat Orton in the main event after hitting him with the belt. Orton was said to have been less over here as a face than he was the last time they were in town and he was a cocky heel"(2004).

The tepid response from live audiences and the Internet Wrestling Community for Randy Orton finally came to a head in January, 2005. At the 2005 version of the *Royal Rumble*, held on January 30, 2005, the culmination of the Triple H-Randy Orton feud was set to take place, two months prior to *WrestleMania 21*. It is interesting to note that in the weeks leading up to the match, which the company had originally hoped would be its top narrative of the year, the focus was shifted from the antagonism between Orton and Triple H towards teasing dissension within Evolution between Triple H and Batista. Orton was positioned as an afterthought by the company, and the match at the *Royal Rumble* served as the ultimate burial of Randy Orton's run as the top star in WWE.

The final match between Triple H and Randy Orton is an example of the potential power the audience can wield over textual producers, as their demands were manifested in the match at the 2005 *Royal Rumble*. Randy Orton was made to look inept during the match, which was completely dominated by Triple H. For example, it is common in professional wrestling for the referee to be "injured" at inopportune moments for the babyface character. In this instance, the babyface will cover the beaten opponent and score a metaphorical victory. The absence of the referee prohibits an actual conclusion to the match, but the sequence demonstrates to the audience that the babyface is the better competitor and would have emerged victorious if only the referee was present to make the official three count. At the *Royal Rumble*, the exact opposite occurred between Orton and Triple H, as when the referee went down the villainous Triple H covered Randy Orton (who is positioned as the babyface in the official narrative) for over one minute, signifying that Triple H (the villain) is the better man. To make this point even more clear, Triple H revives the referee, hits his patented finisher (The Pedigree), and defeats

Orton again, this time officially as the referee counts Orton's shoulders down for the three count. In the final match between these rivals, where Orton traditionally would have finally vanquished his nemesis, Triple H defeated Orton *twice*. In addition, the crowd response during the match signified the audience's rejection of Orton as a top star, as during the match there were audible chants of "Randy Sucks." The result of this match led to many wrestling fans echoing the sentiments of this respondent on an Internet discussion board who stated that:

"His face turn has been almost a complete failure and after losing to Triple H at the *Royal Rumble* he has pretty much nothing to do."

-J. D. Dunn, [www.wrestling.insidepulse.com](http://www.wrestling.insidepulse.com)

This match marks the end of Randy Orton's push as the top star in WWE from the standpoint of the official narratives, but the audience reactions and fan discourses during his entire tenure as a babyface demonstrate that the audience had already decided this long before the *Royal Rumble*.

### **The Power Struggle Between the WWE and the Productive Audience**

Wrestling fans' rejection of Randy Orton as the top star in the WWE is indicative of a power struggle between textual producers and audiences. This analysis demonstrates that the WWE made numerous errors in their official narratives, leading to the failure of Orton's star image to connect with wrestling audiences. The rushing of the confrontation between Orton and Triple H, as well as the failure of the WWE to provide any reason for audiences to identify with Orton, serves as evidence of a poorly constructed narrative that failed to meet audience expectations. However, the primary reason for the tension



between the WWE and its fans is the official media producers' disregard for their audience. The feedback loop between textual producers and consumers allows for audiences to communicate their desires and expectations to media producers, and as I have argued the Internet has significantly shortened the distance between the two sides of that loop. Audiences are now afforded a space where they can have more immediate communication with textual producers, blurring the boundaries between the two sides. The WWE was given ample indications of the narrative wrestling fans wanted for the Orton character, and the narrative they presented conflicted with the desires of the audience.

This disregard for the desires of the audience led to hostility on the part of wrestling fans, as they were presented with a narrative that violated their own plans for the Orton character. The WWE presumed that audiences would follow the lead of the official narratives, cheering Randy Orton as a top star because they were told to. Rather than following the lead of the official narratives, wrestling fans resisted the desires of the WWE and voiced their displeasure in the meta-narratives of the Orton character. These fans still watched WWE programs, and still attended live events. However, they behaved in an oppositional manner to the official media producers by voicing their displeasure and subsequently impacting the direction of the official narratives.

As I mentioned previously, the plan for Randy Orton in the official narratives was for him to feud with Triple H for the entire year, culminating in a match at *WrestleMania 21*. However, the feud was dropped two months earlier in favor of a match between Triple H and Batista, Orton's former teammate in Evolution. The WWE teased dissension between Triple H and Batista for several months prior to their match, building

the anticipation of their eventual battle. Batista eventually turned on Triple H after months of tension, and at *WrestleMania 21* Batista defeated his mentor to the delight of many wrestling fans. This official narrative mirrors the narratives described in the IWC for the Randy Orton character. The tension between Evolution teammates was hinted at for several months before the younger wrestler challenged his evil mentor and assumed his position as the new face of professional wrestling, finally realizing the error of his previous ways and embracing the role of the hero by standing up to the heels in Evolution. The official narrative of the Batista character represents audiences assuming the role of official media producers, as they provided the WWE with the narrative they wanted to see. The WWE failed to provide that narrative in the Randy Orton character and audiences subsequently rejected Orton as a star. This rejection forced the WWE to abandon their plans for the Orton character and present the exact narrative audiences demanded, except with Batista in the role of Randy Orton. This example demonstrates the potential power audiences can wield over textual producers, emerging as writers themselves rather than the more traditional role of media consumer.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

In this analysis I have argued that fans read professional wrestling texts in the context of both the official narratives and the meta-narratives that exist independently of media texts. In addition, I have argued that wrestling audiences possess the capability of blurring the distinctions between textual producers and consumers, as wrestling fans display characteristics normally reserved for official media producers in the virtual space of the Internet Wrestling Community. In the IWC, meta-narratives are circulated that have a significant impact on the official narratives and fans can seize control over the direction of the official narratives to suit their own needs and desires. The characters of Mick Foley, Triple H, and Randy Orton serve as examples of the existence of meta-narratives in professional wrestling as well as the necessity of an audience model that accounts for the potential contributions of audiences as textual producers. In order to bring this argument to a conclusion, I will provide one more example that demonstrates the complex reading practices of wrestling audiences and how these practices can impact the official narratives of the WWE. This example will focus on a match between the characters of Bill Goldberg and Brock Lesnar at the pay-per-view event *WrestleMania XX* (March 14, 2004). As we shall see, in this match the existence of meta-narratives intersects with the productive audience model in a manner the WWE did not anticipate.

The official narrative of the match between Goldberg and Lesnar recalls the inter-promotional feud between the WWE and WCW during the Monday Night Wars. Bill Goldberg wrestled for WCW during the later part of the 1990s and was presented as an unstoppable monster, decimating his opponents in a short amount of time and boasting an undefeated record for much of his tenure with the company. WCW audiences rallied behind the Goldberg character, and he was seen as the company's biggest star during the later part of the feud between WWE and WCW. When the WWE purchased WCW from AOL Time Warner in 2001, the company decided against acquiring his contract. Goldberg remained absent from WWE broadcasts until 2003 before finally signing a one-year contract with the company.

In the interim, the WWE introduced the character of Brock Lesnar in 2002 and portrayed him in a similar manner as the Goldberg character. Lesnar possessed tremendous size and athleticism, as he weighed nearly three hundred pounds and was a former NCAA wrestling champion before signing with the WWE. Audiences quickly saw similarities between the Lesnar character in WWE and the Goldberg character from WCW, as Lesnar would overwhelm his opponents with his power and skill in a manner similar to Goldberg. Live audiences often chanted for Goldberg in Lesnar's early matches, signifying that wrestling fans were aware of the WWE's presentation of the Lesnar character as their version of Bill Goldberg. However, Lesnar was not viewed by wrestling audiences as a mere clone of the Goldberg character, as his wrestling skill and NCAA background helped legitimize him to fans. Lesnar's introduction to wrestling audiences led to speculation among the IWC as to what would happen if the WWE

signed Bill Goldberg and WCW's monster met the WWE's current model. At *WrestleMania XX* these fans would finally get their answer.

Goldberg was signed by the WWE in March 2003 and the two wrestlers were kept apart from each other for the duration of the year in an attempt to build anticipation for their inevitable encounter. It was not until January 25, 2004 that Brock Lesnar and Bill Goldberg finally confronted each other at the *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view event. During a thirty-man match, Brock Lesnar (who was not a participant in the match) ambushed Bill Goldberg and eliminated him from the match. Lesnar's ambush cost Goldberg a shot at the world champion, infuriating the Goldberg character in the official narrative. This initial confrontation was kept brief so that audiences were only provided a glimpse of their future encounter. The following month, at the *No Way Out* (February 15, 2005) pay-per-view event, Goldberg attacked Lesnar during his match for the world championship against Eddie Guerrero. Goldberg's attack led to Lesnar being defeated and served as receipt for Lesnar's actions the previous month. Following this attack, the WWE promoted a match between Lesnar and Goldberg at their biggest pay-per-view event of the year — *WrestleMania XX*.

This “dream” match between Lesnar and Goldberg faced significant problems in the weeks leading up to the event. Bill Goldberg earned a reputation in the IWC as a wrestler that was more concerned with money than improving his wrestling skill, and the meta-narratives surrounding his character were usually very negative. For example, Goldberg's clumsiness in the ring led to a career-ending injury to Bret Hart, one of the IWC's most acclaimed wrestlers due to his incredible skill in presenting believable wrestling matches. Even though Goldberg was presented as a heroic babyface during his

tenure in the WWE, chants of “Goldberg Sucks” were audible at every WWE event in which he appeared. In addition, many wrestling fans discovered in wrestling’s meta-narratives that Goldberg had chosen not to renew his contract with the WWE, which expired immediately following *WrestleMania XX*. In order to alleviate some of the hostility between wrestling fans and the Goldberg character, the WWE inserted one of its most popular stars — “Stone Cold” Steve Austin — as the guest referee for the pay-per-view match. In fact, in the weeks leading up to the match, Lesnar and Austin had more interaction in the official narratives than Lesnar and Goldberg, as Goldberg was often absent from WWE broadcasts in his final weeks with the company.

The complications that the Goldberg character presented for this marquee match pale in comparison to what happened one week prior to *WrestleMania XX*. At the conclusion of the WWE’s weekly taping of *WWE Smackdown!* the Tuesday prior to *WrestleMania XX*, Brock Lesnar informed WWE management that he was leaving the company immediately following his scheduled match with Goldberg to pursue a career in professional football. News of this announcement began circulating on the Internet the same night, as industry insiders such as Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez provided reports of this breaking story. Lesnar’s imminent retirement is a perfect example of wrestling’s meta-narratives, as all reports of this story existed solely on the Internet. The official texts of the WWE never mentioned Lesnar’s decision to leave professional wrestling in favor of a career in football. The company decided to deal with Lesnar’s departure after *WrestleMania XX* and continued promoting the match as if the announcement never happened. However, the WWE grossly underestimated the

prevalence of meta-narratives in professional wrestling and at their biggest show of the year the fans provided a spectacle the company was not expecting.

The special guest referee, Steve Austin, was the first participant to enter the ring at *WrestleMania XX*. He expectedly received a tremendous ovation from wrestling fans in Madison Square Garden, which housed the pay-per-view event. Brock Lesnar was the next performer introduced in the match, and the crowd voraciously jeered his entrance. However, Lesnar was the heel in the match, and this reception was also expected. Finally, Bill Goldberg made his way to the ring and was met with a combination of cheers and boos from the audience. The completion of the performers' entrances segued into the real spectacle of the match, but in this example it was not the spectacle of wrestling. Instead, the audience began chanting "You Sold Out," seemingly in reference to the imminent departures of Goldberg and Lesnar. Immediately following the "You Sold Out" chant, the audience began serenading the ring with a boisterous rendition of "Na Na Na Na, Hey Hey Hey, Goodbye." The wrestlers stood on opposite sides of the ring, apparently frozen by this unexpected reaction. The crowd was so disruptive that the wrestling announcers for the match had no choice but to acknowledge the rumor that Lesnar was contemplating leaving the WWE for a career in professional football, marking a significant intrusion of wrestling's meta-narratives into the official narratives.

This display by the fans at *WrestleMania XX* demonstrates the ubiquity of meta-narratives in the reading practices of wrestling audiences. The WWE assumed that the percentage of fans with any knowledge of these backstage narratives would be very small, underestimating the amount of smarks and smarts that make up their audience. For the first time in the company's history they were forced to acknowledge something that

transpired backstage before they could incorporate the meta-narrative into an official narrative. However, the company did choose to include the match on the DVD release of the event, demonstrating the process of appropriation employed by official media producers when something beyond their control occurs. The decision not to edit the match from the DVD release implies that the company is comfortable with the results of the match, even though they underestimated the knowledge of their fan community.

In addition to the invasion of meta-narratives into the official narratives of the WWE, the match between Goldberg and Lesnar is an example of the audience becoming the spectacle rather than the performers. In this match, the audience's chants and actions remove the spotlight from the wrestlers. Instead, the audience is the focus of the match, as their unexpected display freezes all of the match's participants. Lesnar, Goldberg, and Austin all stand around for several minutes, unsure of how to proceed with their scheduled match in the face of this outburst. This instance of inactivity is an example of the impact audiences can have on textual producers, as the audience grinds the action to a halt in order to explore a narrative of their choosing. Rather than focus on how Goldberg crossed Lesnar in the official narrative, the audience chooses to focus on the meta-narratives of the match. This focus overwhelms the official narrative, rendering it meaningless in the context of this match. Examples such as this demonstrate a need for an audience model that accounts for the potential power fans wield over media producers.

This analysis has provided examples of meta-narratives and audience practices unique to the genre of professional wrestling. Future research could test the applicability of these concepts to other generic examples. At this stage it is unclear if the existence of meta-narratives contextualizes all media texts. In addition, the ability of audiences to



directly impact the direction of official narratives is unclear in genres other than professional wrestling. However, if these practices are unique to wrestling, then this analysis has demonstrated the necessity to examine the genre and its fans in a more sophisticated manner than many previous analyses. Rather than being objects of derision, this analysis demonstrates the complex signifying processes and reading practices of a maligned genre and fan community.

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