

Pinning Down Fan Involvement:

An Examination of Multiple Modes of Engagement for Professional Wrestling Fans

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ABSTRACT

Building on existing literature on fan studies, this ethnography examines the multiple modes of engagement between the audience and the performers/producers at live professional wrestling events. This study identifies five ways in which fans interact with the pro wrestling texts at live events: as spectators, as critics, as performers, as community members, and as theorists, and also suggests two other possible modes of engagement outside the arena setting: fans as proselytizers and fans as archivists. The goal of this ethnographic study is to use live wrestling events as a unique case to develop a more nuanced understanding of the variety of ways in which fans engage with media texts in various modes, many of them simultaneously.

INTRODUCTION

Professional wrestling in its current dramatic form has been a staple of American culture throughout the 20th Century, from carnival athletic shows to sports arenas to national television and pay-per-view. In the first decade of the 21st Century, wrestling remains poised as a key entertainment form in American culture. 2004's *Wrestlemania XX* event in Madison Square Garden on pay-per-view was purchased by 885,000 homes and viewed by millions, according to Meltzer (2005, p. 7), and each year's *Wrestlemania* attracts a similar number of buys and sells volumes of DVDs afterward. However, wrestling is popular not just as a form of television programming but a live event as well, in which fans go not just to participate as spectators but also as performers.

Understanding active fan engagement with “official” texts such as the staged pro wrestling shows has been the point of significant academic energy over the past two decades, launched by the inquiries of Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1991), among others. Jenkins' seminal study, *Textual Poachers*, examines how fan cultures participate in extending the narrative worlds of television shows through fan fiction and other active behaviors that challenged both the passive receiver model that had often been used and other literature that portrayed fan behaviors as somehow abnormal or obsessive.

Pro wrestling texts differ from the world of *Star Trek* that Jenkins and Bacon-Smith study, and from most other fictional narrative worlds that fans participate in, because wrestling texts are staged as live events, in which the fans play an active role. While the behaviors of fans “participating” in the narrative world of a media property exists outside the “official” media production in the case of fan fiction, or fan videos on YouTube, pro wrestling is a space, like the

online virtual worlds of *World of Warcraft* and other similar massively multiplayer online games, in which the consumer plays a pivotal role in the construction of the narrative.

Wrestling has long given its fans an active, participating voice in the performance, and the physical presence of the fan is part of the performance that sets the live wrestling event apart from video, audio, or written narrative, on the one hand, and real-time, collaborative “virtual worlds” on the other. While all sporting events provide fans with the chance to perform, the live sports experience differs substantially because sports do not create an immersive story world with an explicitly fictional serial narrative, in the way that pro wrestling does.

Because pro wrestling (with its long history of live fan involvement, and as a continuously popular American phenomenon) is unique in its relationship with the fan community, the wrestling arena demonstrates the varied ways in which fans become involved with texts. Fan studies are often vulnerable to the criticism of examining only a small niche of the total audience of a particular media property, in their examination of the most active fans; however, a variety of new studies seek to understand both the ways in which fans use media texts as a means of expression and ways in which the deeper engagement of a small percentage of fans influences the greater fan community. (See, for instance, Sandvoss 2005 and Jenkins 2006.) While a handful of pro wrestling ethnographies have been conducted over the past few decades, few have explicitly examined the various modes of active fan performance within the wrestling text, and none have linked their study into the growing body of literature in fan studies. Existing research has neglected to examine specifically how fans engage in these performative processes.

This study contributes both to the growing interdisciplinary research on pro wrestling and to the more substantial body of work of fan studies by examining the myriad ways in which

fans engage with wrestling events. Through conversations and interviews with 50 wrestling fans during observations of five live events, this study provides ethnographic evidence of these multiple modes of engagement between fans and “official” fictional texts. Applying the analytical lens of fan studies to the world of pro wrestling gives new meaning to fan performances, while using the pro wrestling arena as a site for ethnographic research of active fan engagement provides potential new ways of understanding the relationship between fans and content producers in the body of fan studies literature.

GRAPPLING WITH EXISTING RESERACH

The dual roles of professional wrestling fans at live events, particularly how fans as a group engage with the texts as both performers and observers simultaneously, is the concept explored in this research. Particularly, this ethnography examines how a study of fans at live wrestling events can contribute to the understanding of the relationship between “official” content producers and their consumers that is at the heart of the majority of fan studies literature that examines media fandom.

The theories of Goffman (1959) are essential, particularly his dramaturgical concepts of front stage and back stage. While Wilshire (1982a, 1982b) warns that the dramaturgical model of behavior is often overextended in explaining off-stage life, the use of Goffman’s dramatic concepts is particularly apt in examining wrestling fans because the direct participation of the audience in the event as actors rather than just observers expands the stage so that the audience members become participants in the performance. Goffman (1974) also writes about the use of frames in communication to help create definitions in situations. Here, Goffman even links his theories to pro wrestling himself, discussing how wrestlers frame their performances for the fans and break from the traditional sports frame.

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

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

Most scholarly pieces involve analysis of televised matches instead of field research. Yet, the differences between wrestling as a form of television entertainment and wrestling as a live event involving shared performance are significant. Although few ethnographers have

analyzed the fans' performances, it is this communication at the live event among the wrestlers, officials, announcers, and audience that makes wrestling a distinct form of communication.

The extant fan studies research on pro wrestling in particular has primarily focused on specific subcultures of fans. Dell (1997, 1998, 2006) examines the female wrestling audience of the 1950s and their appropriation of the wrestling text through fan newsletters. Clerc (2004) and Salmon and Clerc (2005) study modern female wrestling audiences and their extending wrestling storylines through fiction written on the Internet. These works use concepts drawn from Jenkins (1992) on the appropriation of mass media texts by fans in many different genres, a phenomenon he labels "textual poaching." None of these pieces focus on the specific modes of interaction these fans engage in at live events. Only Turko (1991) briefly analyzes some of the ways in which fans engage with the text of live wrestling shows, observing a group of fans in the arena who supports a villainous wrestler, even coming to the event in costume to support the rulebreaker, to draw ire from the rest of the crowd.

This lack of analysis of the unique wrestling arena environment from a fan studies lens has led to a gap in the growing body of literature on pro wrestling. Moreover, this is a rich area for better understanding fan engagement in fictional worlds for the large body of fan studies literature. The need to develop a greater understanding of the interaction between fans and the media has been the focus of substantial research in the past few years, such as Lancaster (2001), Kozinets (2002), Murray (2004), and Leonard (2005). Further, combining ethnographic research with the lens of fan studies has provided rich results, such as anthropologist Ian Condry's work in understanding the appropriation of hip-hop music in Japanese culture in Condry (2006). Further, more recent fan studies research focuses on the ways in which social engagement around media texts, primarily through the Internet, is bringing more attention to fan

behaviors, such as in Jenkins (2006), and also how a greater understanding of the potential monetary value in more active fan engagement could lead to a change in the business structure in relation to its value of fan communities, such as in Ernst et al. (2003).

Of the ethnographic research that does exist on live wrestling events, the majority of work has focused on the on-stage actors and the arena environment rather than the fans themselves. Turowetz (1975), Freedman (1988), Mazer (1998), de Garis (1999), and Benaka (1991) observe the wrestling world from the perspective of the wrestlers themselves. Everard (2002) and Workman (1977a, 1979) incorporate interviews with wrestlers into their research, while Ortizano (1988) uses interviews with journalists to consider how the newspaper industry covers pro wrestling.

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

Several researchers have attempted to study the wrestling audience through a process of observation and interviewing that places the researcher more directly into the environment. Martin (1972), Jares (1974), Williams (1979, 1989), Freedman (1983, 1988), and Turko (1991)

write observations of professional wrestling matches from the stands. Martin discusses the reaction of fans to stock characters as a reflection of their perceived socioeconomic status. Fans also use wrestling as a major social opportunity to see each other on a regular basis if the wrestling is held regularly at a consistent venue. Jares writes about observing the aggressiveness of a New York City wrestling crowd and the fact that, at that time, many of the blue-collar crowd members believed the action in the ring was partially real, thus differing from the modern pro wrestling fans. Williams (1979, 1989) and Freedman (1988) provide qualitative analysis of specific wrestling fans to examine their lives and motivations. Freedman (1983) writes about the aggression of fans in the arena, debating whether wrestling acts as catharsis or stimulant for this aggression. Berger (1973, 1990) also debates the political repercussions for wrestling audiences after viewing wrestling storylines, although he uses no ethnographic evidence to ground his claims. Turko (1991) provides an overview of his research team's experience in the wrestling stands, describing their immersing themselves as fans, although he does not use specific interviews or data from the fans but rather general impressions. Also, Wunningham (1972) presents a book-length photo essay of wrestling fans with interviews throughout the book.

A few ethnographers have worked more directly with fans. Workman (1977a, 1979) identifies fans on a spectrum from those who totally believe the action to those who distance themselves from it. He interviews both fans and wrestlers to construct this spectrum and the idea that one event can be perceived differently by each observer. This work is based on the initial theoretical research from Cravens and Moseley (1972). Saunders (1998) identifies several types of fans: nostalgic fans who watch wrestling because of their love of it as children, those who attend events as an activity the whole family can enjoy, those who enjoy observing

violence, those who enjoy wrestling for spectacle/fantasy, and those who enjoy wrestling for athletic exhibition. She also writes about the more educated wrestling fans who respond to wrestlers not as part of the show but, using Craven and Moseley's perspective, from the wrestlers' abilities to act out their role effectively. Feigenbaum (2000) identifies wrestling fans on a spectrum consisting of four orders, from those who believe the event is real to those longtime fans who have extensive knowledge of the wrestling production and its history. Seiter (2005) studies wrestling fandom among Latino children and particularly the ways in which young boys identify with wrestling programming because of its focus on a variety of Mexican-American characters.

Perhaps the most effective use of ethnography of wrestling is from the study of communication theorist Nick Trujillo et al. (2000), an analysis of his communication studies class' visit to a 1993 WWE event. A companion piece is provided by Obenaus (1994), a student researcher from Trujillo's class with further ethnographic research building upon the initial group project. Both Trujillo et al. and Obenaus find that the vast majority of wrestling fans do not consider what they see in the ring to be legitimate sport but rather as both a sporting exhibition and a drama, in which wrestlers play roles. Through fieldwork, Trujillo et al. discover that wrestling provides communication among the wrestlers and the crowd, confirming what scholars such as Webley (1986) and others have theorized.

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

analytical lens of fan studies to better understand the multiple modes of engagement wrestling fans have with the text and one another.

METHODS

My interest in professional wrestling fandom as a participant existed before this study began. I first participated in wrestling shows as an audience member, then as an actor in wrestling costume shows staged before fans in Hartford, Ky., and, finally, as a licensed professional wrestling manager. My interaction with fans and my realization of their distinct roles, not as spectators, but as performers themselves, came from direct participant observation. I have attended wrestling events in Kentucky, Indiana, Tennessee, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Toronto, with crowds as small as a few dozen to as large as more than 60,000 and have engaged both as a “passive” and as an active fan myself. At a series of local shows in Kentucky called Bad to the Bone Wrestling (BBW), I would attend wearing an eccentric suit and would sit in the front row, engaging in feuds of my own with particular wrestlers who would come to my section to argue with me.

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

One struggle that both ethnographers in general and fan studies scholars have had to deal with is the struggle between academic observer and active participant. One of the fundamental

differences between Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1991) is that Jenkins was a self-professed member of the fan community he wrote about, while Bacon-Smith took on a more traditional “outsider” academic role. Both are seminal texts in fan studies, and both concentrate on fans of the *Star Trek* media franchise, with their research conducted in the same time frame. Not surprisingly, however, the two books take on very different focus, with the “outsider” observations of Bacon-Smith vis-à-vis the “insider” focus of Jenkins. Trying to find the medium between academic objectivity and a deep understanding of the fan community being studied is at the heart of the debate in and around fan studies literature. In regard to similar debates in ethnographic research Adler and Adler (1987) provides a guide that examines the roles of membership an ethnographer may have with the subject of study, from complete detachment to active membership. My own history with the fan community studied in this ethnography is both its greatest strength and its potential drawback, as one cannot simultaneously hold true “insider” status and completely detached objectivity simultaneously.

While conducting this research, I realized the audience was there primarily to watch and participate in the wrestling show, any interviews/conversations with them would have to be abbreviated. Therefore, I asked a series of 12 questions, six of which had open-ended answers. My primary goal was to obtain information from fans without hindering their experiences at the shows. I based the questions on the informal observations made at previous wrestling events before beginning this research project. At each event, I approached fans and asked them if they could answer a series of questions for me regarding research for an academic project through my university. This approach was necessary to identify my purpose. After approaching the fans, I allowed them to answer at their convenience. I let the fans choose their preferred method of answering. Some fans set up brief interviews in the merchandising area during an

intermission or an interview after the event because their active involvement in the shows prevented them from being able to talk during the matches. Others would suspend the interview during matches only to resume during the brief periods between the bouts because they did not want to miss observing or participating as fans. Because the fans were giving me their time, I allowed them to answer the questions in the method that made them most comfortable and in which they were most likely to give the questions full attention. I found no major differences in those interviews conducted during matches and those obtained from the alternative methods suggested by the fans.

I selected audience members randomly for my in-depth interview, trying to move from closer seats to farther seats, as the sections were available. At some events, the front rows were roped off, prohibiting access. Thus, there were some limitations to access at the larger events, prompting avoidance of the closest ringside seats. Only once did I have someone refuse to talk to me, a fan who had been one of the most involved at his particular event, and so I moved to the person next to him instead. I did not interview anyone under the age of 18. At each event, I interviewed 10 audience members. I chose particular areas or seats before beginning the interview process and then interviewed the fans seated or standing in those areas. By distributing those sections throughout the arena at each event, I was able to achieve a reasonably random population. Because of the length of the wrestling event and the time necessary to schedule interviews and to make my way across the arena, I was only plausibly able to interview about 10 participants per show.

In a three-week period, I attended five wrestling shows. The first was a costume show in Hartford, Ky., with local residents dressing up as famous wrestling stars and putting on a show that was not considered “professional.” The building was at capacity, holding about 350 people.

I personally participated in this show, posing as WWE owner Vince McMahon. I approached the fans I wanted to interview during the time I was not on-stage and then interviewed them after the event had concluded. Because I was an on-screen participant in the Hartford event, I decided that I would only be able to interview fans after the event had concluded. All data presented from the Hartford show, then, comes from observations I made while watching the crowd during my time off-stage. All 10 fans I approached agreed to complete the interview after the show concluded.

The second show, in Lawrenceburg, Ky., was a Salt River Wrestling (SRW) event with about 50 people in attendance. The third show was an Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) card in Louisville that was a television taping with about 750 fans in attendance. The fourth show was a National Wrestling Alliance Total Nonstop Action (NWA TNA) pay-per-view event in Nashville that was being aired live and that had about 1,200 fans in attendance. Finally, the WWE show in Evansville, a non-televised event, had about 3,000 in attendance. For each venue, I gained permission to perform my study either from the arena manager or from the wrestling promoter, depending on who was easier to contact. For a list of the questions answered by each audience member, see the appendix. These questions were selected to examine how fans become involved in such events and their own level of self-analysis regarding their involvement. Because I was attempting to assess the varying levels of involvement of audience members, it was important that my questions focus around the perception of each subject's involvement and my observations of that involvement. Basically, these questions served as conversation-starters, from which I consciously probed for more details based on their initial answers.

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

The types of fan involvement evidenced in this ethnography were discovered through a thematic analysis of the data collected through observations of the five live events and the observations I recorded in the conversations/interviews with fans. Rather than formulating a hypothesis of potential modes of engagement, I sought similarities in both audience behaviors and explicit subject observations about their own engagement with the text. However, since this project was completed by examining only five shows in a particular geographic region and in a short time period, the results are not meant to indicate that the exact behaviors exhibited here are applicable to every pro wrestling event but rather as a cultural snapshot using the fans of this particular place and time as one case that further emphasizes the wide variety of ways in which fans engage with a text and also the ways in which fans can engage with a text in multiple ways simultaneously. Because each wrestling show is a unique cultural experience, my goal as a researcher was to capture the feelings of fans in my general research area at one time, the month of February 2004, at a variety of wrestling events, from large productions to small ones. Wrestling audiences and their involvement in shows tend to change as the wrestling product,

and American culture itself, changes, so some behaviors may be particular to the time and location of the show. Thus, the reliability of the data and the validity of this project are situated in these limitations.

Nevertheless, while the particularities of this ethnography limits the ways in which these results can be generalized, the application of a fan studies lens to the multiple modes of engagement of pro wrestling fans provides a new way of looking at how wrestling fans interact with the official productions of wrestling shows in the interdisciplinary body of literature and pro wrestling. Perhaps more substantially, this project provides a rich case in which the goals of fan studies—to understand how fans engage with texts and the relationship fans have with the official production of media forms—can be examined within the unique setting of the pro wrestling arena, which is singular in the way in which fans can become involved in a fictional world at a live event. By acknowledging not just one form of fan engagement, but rather a wide range of engagements with the wrestling text that often exist simultaneously, this study seeks to complicate more simplified explanations of fan communities as a group which acts as a cohesive unit. Ultimately, this essay describes pivotal modes of engagement that can be examined in relation to multiple other media texts as well.

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

The 50 fans that I talked with at these five shows were of an average age of about 33 and the majority identified themselves either as factory laborers (9) or as workers in some service, retail, or skills-related industry (9). The next largest group of subjects was students (6), white-collar workers (6), and housewives (6), followed by disabled (5), unemployed (5), self-employed (5), and retired (1), with two of the students falling in multiple categories. 29 of the interviewees were male, and 21 were female, and they traveled an average of 45 minutes to get

to the show. On average, the fans attended about 23 wrestling shows a year, skewed most heavily by shows that ran on a weekly basis in a central location. Of the 50 people who participated, six identified themselves as not really considering themselves wrestling “fans” (however, despite their choice to eschew the label, these six were actively engaging in one or more of these modes during the time I observed/talked with them); four identified themselves as “occasional” fans; and four more identified themselves as new fans. The remaining 36 identified themselves as long-time or lifelong wrestling fans.

The fans also identified various motivations for coming to the shows: because they knew someone performing on the show (15); because they enjoyed the athletic exhibition (10); because they loved the characters (8); because a loved one asked them to come along (7); because they wanted to be pro wrestlers themselves (4); because the wrestling arena was a place to meet up with other fans they knew (3) and for a school photojournalism project (1). Of the 50 fans interviewed, none of them mentioned that they thought pro wrestling was a legitimate competition, some fans laughing at my question before I could even finish asking. Among the 50 fans, 22 identified themselves primarily as observers, while the other 27 identified themselves as more active audience members, differentiating between the spectator role of the audience and the performative role of the audience. However, it is important to note that these two modes of engagement are two ends of a continuum and that most fans seemed to act as both observers and participants at various points.

Through conversations with these fans, I identified five different modes of engagement at these live events between the fans and the fictional text they were watching unfold, some behaviors which are more “observant” and others which are more explicitly active. The five modes of engagement I found emphasized fans as spectators, fans as critics, fans as participants,

fans as community members, and fans as theorists. In my conclusion, I will suggest two other modes of engagement that are part of wrestling fandom but not easily observed in the live arena setting. However, identifying these five ways that fans engage with the live wrestling show and providing relevant examples from the interviews to illuminate how fans describe their behaviors themselves emphasizes the myriad ways that fans engage with texts. Understanding how each of these engagement types exist not as distinct categories but as five types of behaviors that occur simultaneously in a fan community, often with a fan participating in the show in more than one of these modes, helps provide a more nuanced way to understand wrestling audiences. Further, by examining these five distinct modes of engagement at live events, this ethnography examines a set of behaviors that may be applicable to other fan communities and, above all, to understanding the many ways in which fans relate to a media text, even within the same community.

Fans as Spectators

Most fans, even those who identified as relating to the text in other ways as well, explained their role in the show, above all else, as a spectator who watched the drama of the wrestling matches unfold. Since, on a continuum of involvement, the role of viewer is the least “active,” it is not surprising that almost all of the subjects interviewed would identify this spectator role as an important part of the fan experience in the arena. When describing their experience at wrestling shows, several of these fans identified the show as “entertaining” and “unpredictable,” relating specifically to the plot of the particular matches. In this mode, audience members said they were able to participate in the wrestling show as a fan of another sport would because, even if the matches are scripted and the wrestlers know how the match is going to end, the audience members themselves do not, so the fact that wrestling is pre-

determined matters little when it comes to enjoying the plot. A 20-year-old male student at the SRW show said:

Wrestling shows are entertaining, like a soap or a movie. I need something to get me off, and it's pro wrestling for me. This is the only sport where the crowd can come and interact with the performers and the wrestlers can communicate with the fans. It's like a soap opera off the set.

Another fan, a 23-year-old female waitress at the WWE show, was in agreement:

To me, it's like a soap opera off the set.

In this mode of engagement, fans are explicitly acknowledging that their basic enjoyment of the show is the same for any fictional media form—characters they know in stories that surprise them. Here, they are clearly engaged as a passive audience who receives a show that surprises them. Some audience members identified this element of surprise as key to the experience in particular. A 51-year-old male meat-cutter at the OVW show said:

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

Similarly, a 31-year-old male video retail store manager at the OVW show said:

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

These fans provide a few examples of this mode of engagement that almost everyone I talked with participated in. Above all else, these fans come to wrestling events because they enjoy “the show,” “the soap opera,” “the theater.” In other words, these fans engage with the text as a spectator because they want to be told a story, to be entertained and surprised. While

some aspects of watching wrestling may be about criticizing, participating, and theorizing, almost all fans are, above all else, a spectator.

Fans as Critics

While almost all fans are spectators, several also identify as critics, not just passively enjoying the entertainment at the shows but criticizing performances and discussing the athletic and artistic prowess of the wrestlers and writers. In particular, the many fans who also expressed an engagement as critic emphasized their love of wrestling as deriving not just by being surprised but by seeing a storyline or physical performance executed well. These fans defended the wrestling genre based not just on the plots and characters but on the athletic and artistic merit of pro wrestling performances and their appreciation of the art form at its best. In their role as critics, several of the fans I talked to said that they could operate as spectators only because and when the performers executed their role well, when the performance could become so strong that they could immerse themselves in the fictional world. In fan studies, this duality of fan/critic has been of particular interest, as fans can be especially articulate about what they enjoy—and dislike—about the performances they watch.

These fans focus on the artistry of the performance or the aesthetics when expressing their admiration for the event. For instance, a 40-year-old self-employed female artist at the Hartford show said:

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

Similarly, a 20-year-old male factory worker at the NWA TNA show said:

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

These fans also step outside the fictional world in their role as critic to talk about the great degree of punishment the performers take physically in their quest to represent violence for the audience, acknowledging that these injuries are sustained, in part, “for” the fans. A 24-year-old unemployed female at the OVW show said:

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

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

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

Some of these respondents demonstrated their appreciation and attention to performance rather than just following the plot because they had some sort of firsthand knowledge of wrestling, whether that be from training to wrestle themselves or knowing people who work in the wrestling business or who are appearing on the show they were attending. When fans started discussing their enjoyment of the show in this mode of engagement, the discussion often shifted to their knowledge of the actors who portrayed the characters in the ring, “insider” news, and the ways in which the character differed from its portrayer. For wrestling fans to discuss wrestling critically while simultaneously engaging with the text as a spectator as well emphasizes that fans can engage in multiple relationships with the text simultaneously, just as many fan studies of communal television viewing focuses on the ways in which fans simultaneously are compelled by the plot of a show and discuss it critically during a viewing experience.

Fans as Performers

While acting as spectators or as critics can be much more active processes of engagement than is often acknowledged, about half the fans also engaged actively in staged performances, particularly their performance as spectators. While all 50 fans I interviewed acknowledged that they were watching a show, at least half of them performed their own active and vocal role in the show. These behaviors, at the larger shows, included chanting along the name of favored characters, booing the antagonists, and basically bringing the shows alive with what people in the wrestling industry call “audience heat,” in that the most vocal audiences lead to the most impressive shows. Most fans realize that they are expected to perform this function at wrestling shows, even if all do not actively engage in this mode of interaction with the text. Further, the fans who are actively performing also know that the writers have scripted their performance a certain way, so that the fans know who the promoters “want” them to boo or cheer, and fans sometimes take joy in straying from the script, in performing against the text instead of along with it, as was highlighted by Turko (1991). At the smaller shows, this often included direct interaction with wrestlers, most often heckling and interacting with characters the crowd dislikes.

In this mode of interaction, as with fan engagement in the show as a spectator, audience members go through a suspension of disbelief, in which the critical mode of engagement with the show is traded in for participation in the narrative world, playing the role of fan. While fans who participate in this show can and often will also engage with the text as critics, these two behaviors normally do not happen simultaneously. When I interviewed many of the audience members, they often had to momentarily stop their engagement with the show as a performer to converse with me about their opinion of the show as critics, shifting from one mode of engagement to the other seamlessly at times. Some fans could talk to me even during a match,

performing one minute and then stopping to continue our conversations. Other fans, unable to switch so fluently back and forth between these two modes of engagement, explicitly told me that they could not talk to me when the matches were occurring so that some conversations had to halt and then pick up again between matches.

Perhaps because many of the fans at the costume wrestling show knew the performers so well, several of these audience members commented on their own performances. A 67-year-old male drilling contractor from the Hartford show said:

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

A 74-year-old male preacher at the Hartford show said:

They make it look real, and you want to believe it is real when you are watching it. You can get carried away and act like it's real, even when you know it's not.

Also, a 22-year-old female factory worker at the Hartford show said that the live event offers an active mode of engagement that she cannot achieve when watching wrestling shows on television, even though she tries:

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

In this case, fan engagement as spectator and as participant may share the need for a suspension of disbelief, but the half of the fans who I observed actively participating in the show as performers emphasized the pleasure they received from role-playing as well. For these fans, the price of admission was the chance to pay to become part of an acting experience, not as a spectator but as an active and vital part of the show. In the case of fans who formed particular cheering sections, some of these fans seemed to explicitly believe that, contrary to the statement made by the woman from the Hartford show, they could change the outcome of the event through their performances, by taking their performance in a way different than they were scripted to.

Fans as Community

Use of the term fan community has most often been used to describe a group of people, often geographically dispersed, who nevertheless connect around a pro wrestling text. Since four of the five shows occur at the same location at regular intervals, three of them on a weekly basis, the fans who came to these events became a fan community in a geographic sense as well, just as a home sports team would. Several fans explicitly acknowledged this mode of engagement, the social aspect of consuming the show, as a driving force for their continued interest. While fans may have engaged with the text as spectators and critics, both modes of engagement that can be done in solitude, many fans saw their engagement with the show as inherently social. While the arena may be a special case, most studies of fans as community have encouraged greater understanding of media consumption as a social event in which the performance itself becomes a text around which relationships are built and maintained.

This happens often in the wrestling community. As Martin (1972) stated, especially at these local venues with weekly events, wrestling shows provides a regular community and

meeting place for fans to sustain relationships. When fans act as performers or as critics, they often do so simultaneously to emphasize their standing within the community, so that fan involvement in other modes of engagement are implicitly also about this formation of community. Especially at small-town shows, where people in the audience may even know some of the performers in the ring, the wrestling show becomes the text through which friendships, and perhaps even rivalries, are calibrated.

For instance, a 22-year-old male irrigation worker at the SRW show said:

I know the fans. I have gotten to know a lot of people here, and I have gotten

Some enemies along the way here, too. I come here every Sunday.

Also, a 28-year-old disabled man at the SRW show said that he enjoyed coming because:

I like to watch the audience carry on and act like idiots, and I join in with

everybody else.

My own observations of fan behaviors at these events emphasized this role. At the smaller shows, fans often moved around seats or used intermission time to go across the arena to say hello to other fans they had spotted. Many of them seemed to have regular seats. At the NWA TNA show, certain fans seemed to group together to become a “cheering section” for a favorite performer and, from the reaction of other fans, seemed to inhabit that same section of the building on a regular basis. Because of the nature of the WWE show, which only came to town infrequently and did not necessarily draw the same fans to each show, this community-building aspect did not seem as prevalent, but the mode of engagement still existed in that small groups of fans who obviously had purchased tickets together used the wrestling matches as a driver for their own conversations, engaging in most of the other modes of engagement listed here as a group.

Particularly interesting to me is the phenomenon of “fans of fans.” Particular fans at these events seem to gain a following of their own, so that audience members would be as excited to watch how a particularly active fan in the front row is going to react to a performer in the ring as they are to watch the performance in the ring unfold. In this case, the fan engagement as spectators may as often involve watching the performance of fellow fans as it does watching the performers in the ring, and this plays an important role in the communal aspects of the pro wrestling experience in these venues. Fans may use their critical knowledge to increase their standing in the local fan community, but they may also use the power of their performances to gain a notable place in the community as well.

Another particularly interesting group of fans were a small group of audience members who explained to me that they engaged with the text as a performer for the benefit of other members of the fan community. A few fans explained that, while they knew that the wrestlers in the ring were performing, they knew that some of the other fans in the arena believed the show was “real,” so they felt part of their duty as an audience member was to react as if the performances in the ring were real for the benefit of maintaining the authenticity of the show. Of course, this sentiment is ironic, considering that none of the 50 people I interviewed identified as believing wrestling was not staged.

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

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

A 52-year-old disabled woman at the OVW show echoed this sentiment:

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

The 22-year-old female factory worker from the Hartford show also made a brief remark about how not participating in the show as she should would be like ruining Santa Claus for some of the other people. In this case, it seems that fans justify their performative engagement of the show by explaining it in relation to the community as a whole and explaining their own active performance as a way to protect a social myth among their community for other fans.

Fans as Theorists

Fans who talked to me about their relationship with the wrestling performance, as well as others in the community, demonstrated a fifth mode of engagement that exists in “meta” form, in that these fans demonstrate various ways to explain the underlying reasons why they or other fans engage with the wrestling text. While fans, in their mode as critics, laud or rip the performances of fellow fans and the wrestlers themselves, fans as theorists attempt to explain the reasons behind various modes of engagement, particularly in explaining the underlying social and psychological reasons why they and other fans act as performers. The community-building explanations some fans gave me as to why they perform—for the benefit of those who don’t realize the show is fake—is certainly a form of this type of discourse.

McLaughlin (1996) writes about what he calls “vernacular theory,” in which he consults a popular music fanzine for its theoretic questions about “artistic authenticity and the realities of economic life,” noting that these fans engage in “legitimately theoretical practice (that) arises out of an intensely local commitment.” In this mode of engagement, these fans are participating as vernacular theorists, not just critiquing performances but considering why they and other fans are drawn as spectators, engage as critics, act as performers, and form communities around pro wrestling texts.

One popular theory for understanding the draw of wrestling seems to be the role of catharsis, particularly among fans who act as performers. These fans believe that they, and others, participate in the wrestling show as spectators and as performers in order to release their own tensions and aggressions. The 74-year-old male preacher at the Hartford show said:

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

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

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

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

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

Other audience members demonstrated their own understanding of the audience's role as performers. For instance, a 21-year-old female student at the Hartford show said:

That's part of the show. Even the audience has a role. They have to act as if they believe it and get into it.

This particular fan was never observed engaging with the show as a performer herself but demonstrated a knowledge that, if many of the fans did not fulfill this role, that the show would lose its appeal. On the other hand, another fan at the Hartford show, a 25-year-old female hairdresser who very actively engaged as a fan performer, said:

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

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

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

In each of these cases, these fans seek to understand and analyze their own involvement in the wrestling show. These types of behaviors are not uncommon among any fan community, and the consultation of fans themselves to describe these processes helped drive this research project because, as fan studies literature so often finds, many of these fans' "vernacular theories" can make significant contributions to an academic understanding of cultural phenomena. These fans, many of whom spend a great deal of time as a community and in the pro wrestling arena, have given substantial thought to what drives the interest of themselves and their fellow fans in engaging with this text, and the fact that all of these fans could engage with me about their involvement of the show, during the show, demonstrates the fans' desire to talk about their own multiple modes of engagement with the text.

CONCLUSION

The existing ethnographies of professional wrestling audiences have sought to understand the types of people who come to pro wrestling events but have not actively questioned the multiple ways in which fans engage with the wrestling text. By examining these five audiences through the lens of fan studies, the resulting identification of five modes of fan engagement provides a more nuanced understanding of how these audiences interact with the text.

More broadly, the use of these wrestling audiences as a case study for an ethnographic exploration of how fans engage with a fictional text has significant implications for the field of fan studies as well. The pro wrestling arena is unique as a massively popular live fictional performance that invites the audience to participate directly with the text; in fact, without audience participation, the text of a pro wrestling performance cannot be completed. However, not all fans are active performers in the wrestling show, so this study has taken into account the multiple modes of engagement through which fans connect with the show.

None of these modes of engagement are mutually exclusive—in fact, they are far from it. Those fans who engage as theorists, for example, were often also engaging as spectators, as critics, as performers, and as community members. On the other hand, while most fans were engaged as spectators (there were some people I observed who really did not seem involved with the text at all and thus were likely not fans but merely chaperones or companions of fans, but none of them were approached as subjects because this study was focused on modes of engagement rather than non-engagement), many of those spectators were not necessarily part of an active community or critically engaged with the show.

Further, I would suggest—although this particular project provides no empirical evidence for this assertion because some wrestling fan behaviors do not or cannot take place in the live event setting—that these five modes of engagement should be supplemented by two others: fans as proselytizers and fans as archivists, based on further non-ethnographic work I have completed elsewhere (Ford 2007). Fan proselytism, including both preaching to the choir by bolstering the commitment of fellow wrestling fans and trying to recruit new wrestling fans into the fold, can take place in the arena setting and were somewhat related to the phenomena I observed through community-building behaviors in the arena. However, much of the fan community's work as grassroots intermediaries for the wrestling show happens outside the arena. Further, fan archiving is a long-documented aspect of media fandom documented by scholarship but is not behavior easily observed at live events, other than photographing and the potential collection of memorabilia, as well as occasional mention of archives as an expression of fandom in conversation. Even though this particular mode of engagement cannot be observed in a live venue, archiving is also a substantial part of many fans' active involvement with the wrestling text, and one another.

Fan studies has spent much of its time engaged with understanding the broad relationship between fans and media producers, as well as tackling the underlying reasons why fans become engaged. Instead, this study has sought to ask not why but how, specifically what modes of engagement could be directly observed in watching and talking with fans at these live events. In the process, the ethnographic results present multiple forms of engagement that overlap and intertwine. Many of these fans slip from one mode of engagement to another throughout a show, and some of them engage in more than one mode of engagement simultaneously.

For future studies of pro wrestling audiences in particular, this study points the way for more in-depth examinations of each of these modes of engagement. Particularly, examining the phenomenon of “fans of fans,” the motivations behind and results of fan decisions to perform against their written role in the show, and the motivation many fans have of “protecting” the wrestling performance for those who still believe the show is “real,” even if that segment of believers may not actually exist, could each be meaningful extensions of the data presented here. In the greater literature of fan studies, understanding the ways in which these in-person modes of engagement map onto other virtual communal performances, such as massively multiplayer online games, or else exploring the ways in which online fan communities and their engagement with traditional video, audio, and written texts both act in similar ways and differ from the modes of engagement presented here could offer substantial new contributions to the fan studies literature. Finally, future studies might look at the seven modes of engagement presented here, and particularly these concluding suggestions about fans as proselytizers and archivists, to test the validity of the final two suggested categories, and this model for understanding ways in which fans engage with texts in general.

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APPENDIX

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