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### The Pro Wrestling Audience as Imagined Community

*Reflecting on the WWE Universe as a "Fan-Generated Narrative" Body*

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#### DOI

[10.4324/9781351233989-11](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351233989-11)

#### Publication date

2019

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

Convergent Wrestling

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[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Goggin, J., & Emmanouloudis, A. (2019). The Pro Wrestling Audience as Imagined Community: Reflecting on the WWE Universe as a "Fan-Generated Narrative" Body. In C. D. Reinhard, & C. J. Olson (Eds.), *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle* (pp. 136-148). (The Cultural Politics of Media and Popular Culture). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351233989-11>

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## 11 The pro-wrestling audience as imagined community

Reflecting on the WWE universe as a “fan-generated narrative” body

*Joyce Goggin and Argyrios Emmanouloudis*

Since the mid-2000s, user-generated content (or “fan-generated narrative”) has thrived using convergent media such as mobile phone applications, online voting, and meme generators. This chapter examines the idea of the “imagined community” in professional wrestling through the lens of convergent user-generated content. Our analysis of several different discourses endeavors to shed light on how various activities and events promoted in professional wrestling and supported on several different platforms reinforce imagined communities. This chapter likewise highlights the ways World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) specifically encourages and supports user-generated content, fan-generated narrative, and content shaping through convergent media.

Live professional wrestling has always been about audience participation. Unlike other kinds of athletic spectacle, live professional wrestling most often relies on audiences making their presence felt, and therefore, without audience participation, “the text of a pro wrestling performance cannot be completed” (Ford, 2007, p. 30; see also Reinhard and Hill in this collection). Hence, as Roger Caillois (1961) observed, the nature of wrestling as performance and spectacle “remains that of an *agôn*” or contest, but its outward aspect may be described as “exhibition” for which spectators are essential (p. 22). Not surprisingly, then, the importance of audience participation in pro-wrestling events is showcased by WWE, an organization known for promoting fan participation for decades while ensuring that fans experience the communal experience of wrestling events to the fullest. WWE encourages and, on some occasions, even requires participation and interaction, which may take forms such as voting for matches that fans want to see or engaging with wrestlers on social media. Such forms of participation are now a matter of priority for the industry because they create new modes of being present for audiences, such as content shaping that supplements traditional cheering, booing, and other forms of live audience participation.

This chapter outlines the ways the pro-wrestling industry has created an imagined community effect around itself, thus enforcing feelings of belonging. Second, and more specifically, it highlights the practices of convergence through which the WWE brand has created and keeps enhancing the fan community it refers to as the “WWE Universe.”

## What is an imagined community?

The term “imagined communities” was initially coined to describe nations, and while many definitions have been put forward, the one first suggested by Benedict Anderson (1991) is widely accepted. For Anderson, “nation” may be defined as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6). Importantly, nations are of necessity imagined rather than affirmed or established as fact “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 7). So, for Anderson, the existence of a nation or community is largely imagined because it exists in the imaginations of the community’s members and is therefore not palpable. In other words, engagement in imagined communities need not be exclusively physical, but can also take place in para-social arrangements. Anderson further explains the choice of “inherently limited” in his definition, which he included because even the largest nations have finite boundaries and are therefore limited. Nations are also supposedly sovereign, as they emerge from ostensibly hierarchical dynastic realms and are thus, at least in principle, also free. Finally, nations are imagined as communities because they tend to embody and represent comradeship, which is to say that, conceivably, anyone can belong to a community, provided they believe in its existence.

Given these basic characteristics and tenets, Anderson’s concept has been applied in various disciplines, including media and cinema studies, to discuss national identity as it is expressed through cultural production. Typically, the notion of imagined communities is related, in media and film studies, to the ways people, even living in “foreign” countries, encounter media content in their native language, and how this content may produce feelings of being part of a larger community and a borderless nation (Tsaliki, 1995; Jordanova & Cheung, 2010).

## Fan (imagined) communities

To illustrate how Anderson’s notion of imagined communities works in the context of pro-wrestling fandom, we cite rapper LL Cool J’s appearance in the opening video of *WrestleMania 31*. In the video, he proclaimed that while “the world’s become a lot smaller” and the “mediums [sic.] have changed,” one aspect has remained constant, and that is the “human connection” and “the feeling you get when you’re surrounded by a sea of strangers, but somehow you feel like you know them all.”

Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) were among the first to suggest that the concept of an imagined community may also be fruitfully applied in audience studies, and LL Cool J’s statement bears this out. They further explain how audience experience transcends time and space as members’ participation becomes thoroughly imbricated in all aspects of their lives.

This unbounded form of audience experience results from the “diffused audience” (p. 69). As an example of a diffused audience, they argue that people who belong to a given linguistic community more readily acknowledge the existence of others outside of the community if they share the same language. Therefore, people who participate in the same spectacle must also feel a sense of belonging or entertain thoughts like those of other audience members concerning a given performance. This is likely one of the reasons people attend performances; to experience this sense of having and even enjoying a relationship with other people (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 66) – exactly what LL Cool J described as being surrounded by strangers but feeling like “you know them all.”

Unlike Anderson’s conceptualization of nations as imagined communities limited by borders, Abercrombie and Longhurst’s (1998) “diffused audience” is an imagined community or nation but one with imagined rather than spatial limitations. As they explain, “in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time” (p. 68), and people feel that they are audience members through a variety of media. Being an audience member is, therefore, “constitutive of everyday life” (pp. 68–69). While Abercrombie and Longhurst were primarily concerned with live performance and traditional media, Internet connections are now widely available, and people can quickly find others with the same interests, preferences, or concerns. The speed and ease of connecting and networking provided by the Internet is a central topic in fan studies, and scholars working in the area have advanced the notion that various media can create the solidarity usually associated with national identity. Hence, the solidarity of fan communities may be productively viewed through Anderson’s imagined communities with the addition of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s diffused communities (Komito, 1998).

Furthermore, Internet-based fan communities produce a sense of belonging and shared purpose, or generate opinions that other fans may express, for example, by liking and by posting the same fan objects on social media. Such a sense of belonging is based not necessarily or only on interaction, space, or language but also on common ideals (Hill, 2014) and a sense of togetherness as an imagined fan community (van de Goor, 2015). Similarly, the simplicity and rapidity of the Internet and the tools it makes available have assisted in group formation (Shirky, 2009), and while like-minded people have always formed groups, the Internet clearly enhances the kinds of interactivity that are central to group formation (Wellman, 2002).

Understanding the relationship between imagined communities, group formation, and the Internet, WWE has developed models for inspiring feelings of membership among its fans. In late 2008, for example, WWE launched its own social networking platform, called “WWE Universe,” on which fans could create their own accounts and discuss WWE programming, performers, and more with other fans. Although the platform folded about two years later, the term “WWE Universe” continues to circulate in popular usage, and today is a frequently employed term in WWE programming.

In using this term, WWE refers collectively to its fans everywhere, whether watching at the venue, at home, or not at all, because every WWE fan is always a member of the WWE Universe. The WWE even named one of the most important championships, the WWE Universal Championship, in honor of the fans (Tedesco, 2016). WWE's imagined community is therefore the WWE Universe.

### **Three narrative structures of professional wrestling**

Before discussing how the imagined community of the WWE Universe shapes itself and its fans, it is important to consider the narrative structures of professional wrestling along with the kinds of audience participation that contribute to these structures. Aaron J. Petten (2010) has categorized audience participation that results in narrative formation as falling into three basic narrative structures. The first, borrowed from Timothy Garrand, is "Linear Structure with Scene Branching" (pp. 438–439) and refers to narratives that have a central plot strand, from which one may deviate freely with scene branches and return to the central plot as a primary pathway. This kind of "Linear Structure with Scene Branching" typifies episodic wrestling, which is presented as though it constitutes a continuous narrative (Petten, 2010, p. 439).

Professional wrestling's narratives, however, are far too complex to be adequately captured in a linear model, and Petten (2010) therefore borrows Garrand's "Hierarchical Branching" model. This model accounts for a specific starting point, from which new strands branch out to include numerous characters and their narratives. Each character is given various choices, thus allowing the user to pick any number of characters and follow their struggles through the narrative. This model is particularly germane to professional wrestling, as spectators can select different characters and follow their (mis)adventures. However, because the complexity of pro-wrestling narratives resists description under the first two models, Petten (2010) further introduces a wrestling narrative branching structure flowchart that accounts for the greater "historical" narrative of wrestling, comprised of interconnected and intertwined multiple macro-, micro- and nano-narratives.

While useful, Petten's analysis was written in 2010, at a time when WWE's content had not fully transitioned into the possibilities of interactive multimedia narrative. Since that time, new factors have arguably entered WWE's narrative logic given that, for every kind of performance, the obligation is "to provide continuity for the audience" (Goffman, 1974, p. 234), and WWE no longer relies solely on television for that purpose. Thus, Petten's work focuses on televised content, yet WWE's narrative currently takes place in interactive online spaces as well. While online narrative production is perhaps still in a fledgling state, it is certainly a significant and steadily growing factor in the WWE fan-produced narrative constellation since WWE constantly employs tactics such as online match voting and rivalry build-ups on social media to bring its storytelling to online platforms.

With the advent of the Internet, even without a televised event, the WWE narrative continues in a persistent space. On the Internet, WWE performers communicate with their fans, engaging with them in the guise of their signature characters, or maintaining and often exacerbating their rivalries. Such online activity incorporates the theatrical playfulness that characterizes wrestling and distinguishes it from boxing or other sports played in earnestness and without a similar pretend or make-believe factor. Indeed, many WWE programming rivalries have started with a tweet in which one wrestler confronts, taunts, or provokes another wrestler. Now fans can witness this kind of performer interaction, both as spectators and as tweeting participants. Such practices differ from the lively pre-taped promos played during WWE's programming given that two (or more) wrestlers interact while the audience observes, reacts, and spreads the message. Social media therefore offer participatory options that traditional wrestling programming cannot, and professional wrestling becomes compellingly imbedded in and interwoven with fans' everyday lives, reinforcing the carefully constructed mythology that defines each featured wrestler, or creating another image around them.

However, in convergent storytelling such as we have just described, ignoring peripheral narratives does not affect viewing, nor does it necessarily diminish the sense of belonging that fans experience. Moreover, the main product remains the televised broadcast, which is where the heavy media and industrial emphasis is still placed. Thus, if fans miss tweets or Facebook broadcasting, they will not have missed essential information and can still follow various branching wrestling narratives of conflict, rivalry, victory, and defeat.

### **Three tiers of audience participation in professional wrestling**

Over the years, pro-wrestling plotlines have mainly focused on the struggle between good and evil. What makes these stories interesting, though, is that pro-wrestling storytelling can be playful; the sport self-consciously deals in illusion, and wrestlers are known for their outrageous characters and costumes. Meanwhile, the interaction between wrestlers and fans is guided through three different but intersecting tiers of audience participation: traditional audience participation, social media, and mixed narrative platforms. These three tiers shape the narrative and strengthen fans' sense of belonging. Indeed, pro-wrestling live events cannot take place without audience participation and the collaborative creation of a narrative. Here again, contemporary technologies have had an enormous impact on this entertainment, allowing for more active and visible fan participation. Indeed, WWE continuously exploits all three tiers of audience participation, as well as the technology in which narratives are based to create a worldwide community, the WWE Universe.

The first tier, of traditional audience participation, has a physical component that permits participation in a spectacle. This includes chanting a

wrestler's name (e.g. during a wrestler's entrance) or repeating a wrestler's catchphrase during the execution of a move (i.e. John Cena's "You can't see me" or Ryback's "Feed me more"). Other traditional forms of participation include cheering or booing, reacting to an announcement, or onscreen showcasing of signs and merchandise brought to the venue by fans.

The second tier is based on social media, which WWE relies on to involve its audiences more actively. This is especially true of Twitter, where the fictional world of WWE's programming finds fertile ground for its own continuance and expansion (Litherland, 2014, p. 532). Moreover, the information that appears when wrestlers enter the ring, bearing their names and social media accounts, exemplifies this tier, in which social media are remediated on television. Posting wrestlers' social media accounts next to their names, along with championships they have won and various other accomplishments, positions these accounts as crucial information. Rather than posting other data like height, weight, or age, the production team adds social media addresses as part of the wrestler's identity. Evidently, WWE expects audiences to connect with wrestlers on social media and to engage in the continuation of a narrative that they are already following on television. This phenomenon sets up a convergence of multiple devices, thus leading to what has been described as "second screen" or "social TV" (Ducheneaut et al., 2008; Lee & Andrejevic, 2014).

The third tier of mixed narrative platforms consists of various possible combinations of physical and online activities, sometimes even paratextual ones, conducted by WWE Superstars who use media to cement a closer relationship with their fans. One example of how paratext and context work together in fan narrative production involves the playful aspects of wrestling – the characters, costumes, and backstories – and how these are sometimes abandoned in favor of another, perhaps less ludic or contrived form of communication between wrestlers and fans (for more on the connection between paratexts and professional wrestling, see Castleberry in this volume). Hence, on various media platforms, Superstars occasionally break "kayfabe" or the practice of portraying wrestling events and rivalries as though they were genuine. Wrestlers break kayfabe when they drop their character and reveal some ostensibly authentic aspect of their everyday lives to the audience, which then takes on a paratextual relationship with the ostensibly "real" characters with whom fans are familiar

One example is Zack Ryder's web series *Z! True Long Island Story*, which launched in 2011 and invited viewers to follow his daily routine, punctuated by comic skits and segments. The show caught on quickly and WWE, noting its success, incorporated Ryder's show into their main programming. Such an example may indicate that fans can indeed impact the company's content under specific circumstances. Similarly, wrestler and avid video game fan Xavier Woods started his own series *UpUpDownDown*, in which he plays video games with other wrestlers, who often break kayfabe and abandon their stage characters while promoting their off-camera personalities. Perhaps such

ventures, when presented to a wide audience, strengthen and enhance community bonding, given that the objects of the audience's admiration present themselves in a supposedly off-camera manner, ostensibly allowing the audience to imagine what it might be like to interact with these popular wrestlers more intimately. In a potentially more extreme and intimate version of this phenomenon, Chris Jericho, who is very active on Twitter, also occasionally breaks kayfabe by dropping his villainous character brand. Yet, while Jericho may be inclined to break kayfabe by replying graciously to fans' compliments on Twitter, he also publicly and aggressively returns fans' insults and provocations.

Notably, these three tiers of audience participation, conducted through traditional means, social media, or mixed media, are fluid and may occur simultaneously. Significantly, no tier is more important or prevalent than the others. While the first tier perhaps defined the transfer of narrative content in the past due to its more traditional linearity, numerous technological innovations of social media and mixed narrative platforms fill the WWE Universe landscape.

### **Three tiers of audience and narrative participation plus imagined communities**

The most obvious way for pro-wrestling fan communities to generate narrative is through verbal expression, such as voicing support or disregard. This first participatory tier activity is accompanied by other means of expressing fandom and belonging, such as dedicated clothing and accessories. The semiotic gesture of reinforcing verbal expression with clothing became popular in the mid-1980s and early 1990s when fans of Superstars like Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior began wearing the official fan shirts and costumes of their favorite performers, and even imitated the stars' characteristic gestures. In response, professional wrestlers labeled their fans "Hulkamaniacs" or "Jerichoholics." Such first-tier participatory activities demonstrate what Shane Toepfer (2011) has called "markers of group belonging" (pp. 150–153).

Once fans have "marked their territory" and created a sense of belonging, they often generate narrative and, through applause and jeering, may also influence the content of a promo. For example, when crowds boo John Cena, he frequently interrupts his own promo and addresses his detractors. Likewise, "heels" verbally attack those booing them, as in 2016 when Chris Jericho called the fans "stupid idiots." In addition, audiences give out "certificates of approval" (or disapproval) for certain branded gimmicks, scenarios, and incidents, and their influence is considerable. Indeed, WWE ended a feud between Jake "The Snake" Roberts and Hulk Hogan because fans expressed dislike for Hogan, the bigger star and the company's flagbearer at the time (Pro Wrestling Torch, 2013). In other words, live-audience fans may actively influence a wrestling narrative in several ways and are not content to just encourage the performers by voice and gesture alone (see Reinhard in this collection for more on this content interactivity).



The fan experience and sense of belonging becomes considerably more complex with the introduction of second- and third-tier narrative production. For example, the second tier involves a combination of physical and online interactivities, such as the launch of WWE's smartphone application, which followed the closure of the WWE Universe website. The WWE app offered users exclusive features and content, like news, highlights, videos, and interviews, and allowed audiences to create the content they watched in real time. To popularize the application, WWE screened matches for which the audience could vote. During the November 4, 2013 episode of *Raw*, for example, the audience was invited to vote on who would face Randy Orton: Dolph Ziggler, Big E, or The Miz. Thus, as stated on WWE app's entry for the 2015 Shorty Awards (n.d.), the app "bridges the gap between television and social media by showcasing storyline-related tweets sent between Superstars."

Another example involves John Laurinaitis, who served as *Raw* General Manager in 2012. Laurinaitis launched a practice he called "People Power," intended to initiate a new era in which the crowd would get exactly what they wanted through the injection of social media. However, because Laurinaitis performed as a heel, he accomplished the opposite by putting fan-favorite wrestlers in dangerous situations and depriving them of title opportunities. Yet even this brief episode demonstrates the importance of audience participation in shaping emergent wrestling narratives. Furthermore, by empowering fans, WWE acknowledges that, to some extent, fans play the role of the performer (Ford, 2007), and giving fans what they appear to want includes the power to shape televisual content and impact emergent wrestling narratives.

While the WWE app still exists, it features different content and does not allow users to vote for matches; this change illustrates how the organization shifted focus to other platforms and means of distributing its content. For example, the use of mainstream platforms like Facebook, Periscope, and YouTube made it easier for WWE to distribute content. Indeed, continuing to provide exclusive content through the WWE app would require fans to download it, whereas content available on mainstream platforms is likely to reach a wider audience, while some "passers-by" might also become acquainted with the content.

More importantly, the combination of the three narrative and participatory tiers creates a sense of belonging to WWE. Thus, WWE maintains an active presence on Twitter, a platform that is highly instrumental in fortifying the notion of a community, even when participants physically inhabit different places (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011). The same occurs in fan communities, and more specifically in the WWE fan community. Along with encouraging its performers to be active on Twitter, WWE maintains an official Twitter account and a second account under the name "WWE Universe." According to the profile description, this account serves as the "Official Twitter account of the WWE Universe, worldwide fans of World Wrestling Entertainment." Thus, while the company uses its regular Twitter account for promoting brand content, it uses the WWE Universe account

to call fans to action and ask them vote for their favorite matches, thereby becoming impresarios and critics themselves.

Given these various media platforms and strategies, it seems WWE built its current narrative structure around transmedia, meaning various elements of story are dispersed across multiple channels (Jenkins, 2007). Tom Phillips (2014) notes how, since the launch of the WWE Network, the company has intermittently acknowledged that a “real” world exists beyond the playful, pretend kayfabe world portrayed in WWE programming (see also Watts in this collection). WWE’s policy of involving fans partly accomplishes this, as it did in the *Royal Rumble* (January 2014) by addressing fans’ disappointment that Daniel Bryan was not booked to appear. Such actions exemplify how WWE allows for intrusions of reality into its kayfabe content, while at the same opening its narrative to audience participation and authorship.

The combination of audience reaction and social media outcry over Bryan’s absence at *Royal Rumble*, and the subsequent community formation among his supporters, gave rise to the “Yes! Movement.” This entailed Bryan’s fans shouting “Yes! Yes! Yes!” during his matches as well as promos created to express support from the fans. The movement reached a peak on the March 10, 2014 episode of *Raw*, as Bryan’s fans stormed the ring to protest their favorite wrestling character’s omission from *WrestleMania XXX* that same year. At the same time, Bryan’s fans “hijacked” the show and refused to leave unless he was given a chance to win the world title on *WrestleMania XXX*. Bryan subsequently received his opportunity to compete in the *WrestleMania XXX* main event, and he won the WWE World Heavyweight Championship in one of the most significant examples of fannish reaction and input impacting wrestling’s predetermined narrative.

In several ways, the narrative logic involved in and emerging through professional wrestling distinguishes itself from other, more traditional forms of narrative. Furthermore, this logic resembles the one found in video games and other new media platforms (Petten, 2010). What really distinguishes the constitution of pro-wrestling narratives, however, are the ways audiences may become involved in narrative production, thereby exercising more agency in the world of professional wrestling and its emergent narratives. That said, however, such interactivity in this case does not necessarily mean that the audience controls the spectacle (Petten, 2010); although social media do not allow for total audience control of narrative production, they do facilitate the creation of communities that share ideas, and then bring these communities together with the performers.

Additionally, the possibilities for interaction afforded by various media allow performers to expand and grow their characters and progress their stories. Hence, in 2013 fans could read Cesaro’s (then known as Antonio Cesaro) tweets about the United States and engage in online verbal interaction with the star. WWE also hosts numerous “twitterviews” with its performers, and fans can send in questions for the performers, who then respond in character. This interaction between WWE performers and their fans is crucial for both

the WWE corporation and for the fan base, given that it helps fans feel connected while all parties – fans, performers, and producers – “re-emphasise [. . .] the importance of each other” (Bennett, 2014, p. 118).

### The playfulness of audience behavior

For Petten (2010), professional wrestling allows for ritual in the form of participatory acts such as those noted, but he fails to account for the current status quo when he writes that wrestling “is not a domain of interactivity” (p. 446). Here again, Petten was writing when WWE had yet to develop their interactive strategies, which have since manifested in a variety of new ways. Thus, fans may now have “an active, participating voice in the performance” (Ford, 2007, p. 4), which effectively results in a blurring of audience and producer roles (Reinhard, 2016).

Writing on the audience’s participation in emergent pro-wrestling narratives, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard (2016) explains that, unlike theater or film, professional wrestling has no fourth wall to break, making it and the interaction around it more like sports performances and presentations. There is, however, a crucial difference: the outcome of a wrestling match is predetermined, although the overall experience is not. If the audience makes its presence known, its participation affects the performers’ storytelling and both parties – performers and audience – experience an emotional connection with that narrative. In discussing precisely this phenomenon, Caillois (1961) pointed out that spectators of sporting events, like the competitors themselves, often unconsciously incline their bodies in the direction they would like to see the ball move or, in this case, where they would like a punch to land.

It seems evident, then, that the complex behaviors of wrestling fans fail to jive with those of passive audiences or entirely conform with most audience models found in media studies. The behaviors of wrestling audiences result in the various kinds of narrative formation and interactivity just outlined and contribute to the intrinsic ludicity or playfulness of wrestling (Toepfer, 2011). Play is essential to wrestling in many ways, such as in how live audiences are encouraged and expected to act out along with the in-ring performers (Toepfer, 2011) and to play along with the wrestlers’ “as if” performance (Ford, 2007). Both these behaviors belong to Caillois’ well-known classification of types of play; hence, aggressive banter as well as wrestling itself would fall into category of *agôn* or antagonistic play. Furthermore, because much of this activity is a performance that involves pretending and playing “as if” it was real, the spectacle relies on mimesis or imitation, another of Caillois’ four categories of play.

Toepfer (2011) adopts Brian Sutton-Smith’s seven rhetorics of play as a framework to describe pro-wrestling audiences. Two of these – play as power and play as identity – apply to the current study. One example of “play as power” would be fans’ collective participation in communities when those communities function as resistant subjects that challenge the rules and

messages communicated through the spectacle (Toepfer, 2011), by supporting or disapproving of the action in the arena or online. Interestingly, because all results in wrestling are predetermined, and because the performers mimic both the traits of their branded character as well as actions that fit with a script, “a competitive *mimicry* is born in the public, which doubles [as] true *agôn*” – that is, as much “true *agôn*” or contest as wrestling can offer (Caillois, 1961, p. 22).

Similarly, pro-wrestling narratives’ capacity to generate a sense of belonging correlates with “play as identity” (Toepfer, 2011). The play of identity, or a ludically co-created identity, takes shape with intensity as fans watch and participate in pro-wrestling events while, as spectators, they share in the profound communal experience of the emergent pro-wrestling narrative. Again here, the distinctive intensity of co-created identity was also noted by Caillois (2011), who described the process as a “physical contagion” that collectively takes hold of audiences. Moreover, the experience of co-created identity when it occurs online is arguably rendered more powerful because it is not limited by space; fans may be virtually present without being physically present (Toepfer, 2011).

Moreover, Toepfer (2011) separates the live from the online behaviors of wrestling audiences, yet it is evident that these behaviors can also be combined: for example, when live, in-the-arena behavior coincides with online activity such as tweeting and Facebook posting. Fans can therefore intervene in the performance and communicate with other fans not at the same location, as well as with performers, through their live-audience reactions and their online input, as wrestlers develop characters that guide fans through their emergent narratives (Petten, 2010).

These last observations connect with those of Erving Goffman (1974), who argued that pro-wrestling matches may function as ceremonies during which participants constantly address the audience. Likewise, Caillois (1961) argues that pro-wrestling events are serious and significant “intrinsic spectacles” that “are dramas whose vicissitudes keep the public breathless, and lead to denouements which exalt some and depress others” (p. 22). While both scholars attribute a good deal of gravitas to wrestling, they also implicitly take identity formation into account in the movement of play, as a function of the performer’s ludic, agonic dialogue with the audience. Similarly, the notion of identity formation through play confirms Roland Barthes’ (1975) insight that “the function of the wrestler [. . .] is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him” (p. 14), and therefore both the performer and the audience, whose expectations are not always predictable, co-create each other’s respective identities in play, and double the agonistic spectacle through mimicry as Caillois suggested.

## **Conclusion**

Themes such as love, jealousy, survival, and revenge have all been examined through the lens of professional wrestling and reduced to the hard, simplistic

“good vs evil” binary. Over time, new narrative techniques have developed through which these essential themes (i.e. good vs evil) are recounted and disseminated in professional wrestling, helping the sport and its fan bases to thrive and expand. Interactivity, audience participation, and community formation are essential to the pro-wrestling spectacle, and highly valued and anticipated by pro-wrestling promoters. Through traditional audience engagement, social media, and mixed techniques, WWE offers audiences an experience that sets it apart from other forms of entertainment, and from other wrestling organizations. While WWE’s audience experience is distinguished by the organization’s technological capabilities, the resultant fan-generated narratives also benefit professional wrestling.

However, the predetermination of pro-wrestling results, storylines, and matches limits the ways and extent to which audiences may intervene in emergent wrestling narratives; yet audience members may still leave their mark on the developing story by engaging in traditional forms of participation, social media activities, or mixed narrative platforms. Moreover, when audience members affect the wrestling narrative, they do so as part of the collective effort of an imagined fan-based community; thus, fans’ actions are also part of a community. Interestingly, this means that pro-wrestling interactivity combines fans’ physical and online interactions. Further investigation is therefore needed to understand how the pro-wrestling community members interact among themselves in online spaces, and whether hierarchies emerge among fans or if their interactions remain egalitarian.

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