

# Introduction: Why Professional Wrestling Studies Now? Legitimizing a Field of Interdisciplinary Study

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Often the purpose of popular culture is to entertain the masses. The word “entertainment,” not unlike popular culture or even communication, is ubiquitous in that it contains many meanings for many people. This is, of course, indicative of all language, but certain terms carry more weight, value, or alternative definitions. Thus, in a sense, fans and critics, audiences and consumers, students and scholars all repeat, ritualize, and re-negotiate pop culture to not only enjoy but also to decipher or contextualize it. In other words, people *wrestle* with popular culture to understand cultural systems as well as co-create or share new interpretations of human expression.

Professional wrestling is popular culture. Popular culture gains distinct texture and momentum with professional wrestling and its specific pleasures and delights. In a world of increasing infotainment, fake news, digital identity crises, and social media pandemics, professional wrestling becomes a site in which to observe these mainstream sociocultural issues in microcosm. Fake news is kayfabe, online performativity is a work, and social media campaigns can be top-down manipulated or bottom-up inspirational. The genre of pro wrestling is more than a physical story form. It articulates class struggle and personifies the negotiation of power—sometimes fair but oftentimes stacked against the just, the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1  
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virtuous, the universal underdog. Pro wrestling grapples with real-world issues but recognizes the advantage of funhouse inversion so that social anxieties might be cathartically addressed through routinely athletic performance art.

We identify professional wrestling as an arena of entertainment unique in convention and form yet reflective of many aspects of other forms of popular culture. These differences and similarities make professional wrestling a particularly interesting subset of popular culture to study. Is professional wrestling “real” or is it “fake?” Is it sport, or spectacle? Do audiences prefer mainstream or independent talents? Is there equality between male and female pro wrestlers? Is wrestling better viewed live and in person or through a televisual screen? Should wrestlers train like professional athletes or persuasive orators? Does the industry struggle with racial division or political correctness? Should scholars investigate this phenomenon from objective or subjective sets of methodological perspectives? The answer to these questions, we collectively argue, is *Yes! Yes! Yes!*

As with pop culture studies, which navigates ridicule from the larger humanities, from the social sciences, and from within academe at large, pro wrestling studies faces marginalization. This essay explores the reasons for such positioning, as well as the argument for taking this “fake” sport seriously. To accomplish this task beyond this essay, the contributors of this special issue each approach professional wrestling from varied perspectives of consumption, assessment, and theoretical evaluation. Our collective effort is to shine a light on existing wrestling-related scholarship and extend the notion that pro wrestling remains an under-represented division of scholarly interest within the umbrella of popular culture studies. Interdisciplinarity lies at the heart of our intent, and we extend an olive branch to relevant fields and interests just as we welcome the existing, and constructive, criticism that will strengthen a Professional Wrestling Studies Association.

This effort is collective, communal, and embraces the spirit shared by audiences and fans. Our contributors range from esteemed faculty to graduate students to independent digital media journalists to impassioned and expressive fans. This initial essay offers to those pop culture scholars and students unfamiliar with professional wrestling an overview of the phenomenon and the typical approaches to criticizing and studying it. We then present our conceptualization of the Professional Wrestling Studies Association, with the understanding that this special issue represents the first major publication associated with it; thus, the essays within illustrate our interdisciplinary approach to professional wrestling studies, as we seek to legitimize the field.

## Defining Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling has a history of being maligned given how it exists between sports and fiction. Non-fans ridicule it for its lack of purity, being neither sport nor performance but both simultaneously; while people rarely degrade other performative arts and entertainment like theater and film for being fake, no such qualms exist when viewing professional wrestling (Ball 144). While professional wrestlers are athletes, professional wrestling itself is not a sport. In sports the teams' owners do not control the outcome and the players do not know it in advance. At the same time, professional wrestling is more than just a fictional performance as seen on the stage or screen because of the athletic training the performers undergo and the potential for fans to impact what happens in any match. Rather than distance ourselves from this bastard hybridity, we argue this fictional-yet-realistic nature makes professional wrestling such a fertile field for analysis.

One of the first to write on professional wrestling, Roland Barthes in 1957 helped set the foundation for how to negotiate and embrace its hybridity as a fan and a scholar. His analysis in *Mythologies* provided a

perspective that fans, scholars, and fan-scholars use to argue for professional wrestling's worth: "Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque" (15). Barthes argued that the constructive nature of professional wrestling as a spectacle could reflect, represent, and reinforce moral, social, and cultural beliefs and practices. Viewing "sports entertainment" from this perspective illuminated, concretized, and normalized how to think about it. With Barthes' work, professional wrestling could be seen by scholars as akin to any other performative art and entertainment

Professional wrestling exists as many things, and can be any one thing to any given person. It relies on its audiences to interact, and sometimes takes their lead for how to handle a wrestler, match, storyline, or entire promotion. Professional wrestling changes, evolves, and morphs because of the interactions between promoters, wrestlers, and fans. Professional wrestling's polysemic nature exists because of its metaphoric nature as it comments, reflects, and even perpetuates sociocultural structures and meanings. "The squared circle, like the medieval stage, comes to represent the world itself. Its oppositions, hierarchies, conventions, and transgressions become at once more and less than what might actually be perceived in the ring itself" (Mazer 7). This metaphoric nature allows it to be read in a variety of ways.

Professional wrestling is the industry, the text, the culture, the society, and the hobby. Academics have described it as "classical theater, Kabuki, Middle English drama, and ritual drama, melodrama, moral order, and morality plays, and these are just the scholars interested in its performance aspects" (Leverette 103). To Mark Leverette, "I see Greek tragedy; I see Roman gladiatorial games; I see a corporate empire that would make an excellent model for market control; I see tales of socio-political strife played out in elaborate metaphor; I see economic matters of the day come to life in the form of matches; I see a television experience that has no

equal” (79). Because professional wrestling is so many things, we have multiple texts, practices, and processes to analyze: wrestlers, fans, promoters, texts, promotions, business practices, storylines, characters, matches, moves, and more. We can also consider the contexts surrounding professional wrestling: the political, economic, cultural, and social implications. The text and context can occur at any different level. These texts and contexts change over time and from space to space. With so many things to look at, we need more than one perspective to look at them, and the history of research done in this field demonstrates this interdisciplinarity—but a field lacking an interdisciplinary community.

### History of Professional Wrestling Studies

While it can be many different things to different people, professional wrestling still struggles for acceptance in academic circles. Perhaps because it can be so many different things, the field has lacked coherence. “Unlike other areas of study such as film or, to a lesser extent, television, professional wrestling does not have a body of already-analyzed and broadly-accepted ‘canon’ texts to provide some kind of guiding context; the work of academic cultural analysis has essentially preceded a body of mainstream literary analysis and canonic elevation” (MacFarlane 138). With so many different academic perspectives used to study professional wrestling from different disciplines and methodological approaches, collectively these different perspectives coalesce under one academic aegis solidified as “professional wrestling studies.”

Of course, research has been done on professional wrestling for decades. Historically, professional wrestling studies have been interested in understanding the fictional nature of “sports entertainment” and critiquing the matches, wrestlers, and promotions for being misogynist, racist, jingoist, etc. Historically, without any relationships to specific countries, towns, or other entities, wrestlers were “free to take on identities

of persons or groups both within and outside their immediate society. The identities assumed by wrestlers and the alliances formed by them offer a rare opportunity to observe, on the one hand, the nature of stereotypes held by the organizers, the wrestlers, and the public, and, on the other hand, the interests of the public revealed in the need for explicit stereotypes” (Ball 4). Thus, identity issues have been primary to professional wrestling studies given the spectacle’s propensity to reflect, represent, and reinforce sociocultural and historical norms and values.

While it is important to understand the circulation and perpetuation of stereotypes, the analytical focus also fueled the perception of professional wrestling as unworthy of academic consideration. Academics and other elites have long viewed professional wrestling as being the purview of the lower and working classes, and thus trading in the lower morals, values, norms, and stereotypes of those classes. This perception has some merit, given the preponderance of lower and working-class individuals proclaiming themselves as professional wrestling fans (Mazer 7). At the same time, viewing professional wrestling as merely reflecting such class-based values does not fully explain the phenomenon, given how, with the WWE especially, the promotions are controlled by upper class individuals who create the texts “to maximize profits and to surreptitiously promote the core values of conservative bureaucratic elites” (Ball 141). From this perspective, those lower values existed not because they reflected the working class, but because they represented how the elites viewed the working class. Such stereotypes, then, create conflict and further repress lower and working-class fans, and studies that focus only on such stereotypes further those aims.

Along with a focus on stereotypes, Dan Beard and John Heppen have catalogued other academic approaches to studying professional wrestling, including: “wrestling as performance or drama... Media criticism of wrestling studies the issues of gender, sex, ethnicity, stereotype, and politics of its storylines” (26). Similarly, academic work has drawn on

other legitimate fields to normalize this lower-class entity and phenomenon, such as dramaturgy, theatre, folklore, “often eliding the distinction between sport and theatre or sport and ritual in order both to make their points and to recuperate wrestling from its status as a less than legitimate form” (Mazer 7).

Indeed, according to Sharon Mazer, “What a survey of the literature ultimately reveals is the range of theoretical discourses that may be applied to wrestling. [...] As a consequence, academic studies of professional wrestling are best defined by the writers’ relative proximity to the ring” (7). In this collection, both Eero Laine and Garret Castleberry explore the interdisciplinary nature of pro-wrestling studies. Within the past decade, more research has emerged on professional wrestling from these various perspectives, perhaps validating Mazer’s contention. As more pro-wrestling fans emerged in graduate school and academia, they brought their different theoretical and methodological perspectives to bear on the texts of their fandom. Such fan-scholars have thus produced a diverse body of scholarship on which to base a field of professional wrestling studies. What could help now is the development of an interdisciplinary community built around this interdisciplinarity.

## Contemporary Professional Wrestling Studies

If our goal is the legitimization of professional wrestling studies, then we should consider how this can be done. Previous work focused on defining the entity and phenomenon and criticizing it along, ultimately, class boundaries. The concerns of historical professional wrestling studies remain in modern studies, but two new trends in professional wrestling indicate more possibilities. Digital communication technologies, especially social media, have impacted how wrestlers communicate with their fans, and new online technologies have changed how promoters distribute their shows. More texts, then, have been added to what defines

professional wrestling, promoting and requiring more theoretical and methodological approaches to studying these texts and practices.

First, the Internet, social media, and mobile technologies have expanded the amount of wrestling texts available to analyze, making available wrestling from various time periods and locales. Wrestling has become more widely available because of digital communication technologies that allow for the distribution of matches from different promotions as well as communiques from the wrestlers themselves. For example, the WWE Network gives fans access to decades' worth of matches from different promotions either owned or licensed by WWE, and provides a storehouse for newer programming meant to further the appeal of WWE Superstars, such as *Table for Three*, *Ride Along*, and *Swerved*. The Network also offers cartoons for the younger kids now logging in and getting to establish that fan relationship with the WWE. Meanwhile, older audiences that grew up watching shows from previous decades can go back and watch the WWE canon (along with WCW, ECW, WCCW, NWA, and more) and have a conversation with younger audiences about older matches and wrestlers and their importance to the WWE's fictional history.

In addition, both WWE and other promotions from around the world are using online resources like YouTube to distribute their matches. Promotions such as AAW, NJPW, ROH, Chikara, and many others use these platforms, and even *Lucha Underground* can be found via Sling TV and Netflix, thereby challenging traditional television. Independent wrestlers use social networks to promote themselves via platforms like Twitter and YouTube (see Olson's piece in this volume for more on this phenomenon), while fans use social media to curate and critique wrestling texts. A hardcore crowd of smarks (aka "smart marks") use social media to curate, analyze, critique, parody, and comment on wrestlers, matches, and promotions. In addition, Wrestlers and fans interact with one another via these platforms, all in a way that gives scholars easy access to their



performances. While an internet wrestling community has existed since the internet's inception, the revolution of Web 2.0 involves more people talking than ever.

Digital communication technologies also have provided for another professional wrestling text to study. Perhaps no other media industries offer this ability to study production and the interaction between professionals and fans, because wrestlers and promoters go out of their way to connect with wrestling fans. Scholars rarely have the chance to study a text from a production standpoint or to talk to the producers in the way that wrestling offers. At the same time, wrestlers and promoters are extremely reluctant to respond to questions about the means of production, except during shoot interviews. Luckily, such conversations are now accessible online. Fans and scholars alike can access these interviews via YouTube and podcasts like *The Art of Wrestling* with Colt Cabana.

The variety of texts is met with a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches. The academic study of professional wrestling “ranges from political, to gender, to media critiques” and has been “described as both postmodern media and fetishistic scopophilia” (Souther 270). While professional wrestling has been analyzed for years, recently the field of study has seen an expansion that involves a range of disciplines, theories, methodologies, and methods, all seeking to study the various aspects of professional wrestling. Recent publications have examined professional wrestling from the perspectives of performance studies, rhetorical studies, fan studies, convergence studies, political economic studies, reception studies, sociological studies, cultural studies, communication studies, anthropological studies, health studies, and more. This expansion demonstrates the potential for professional wrestling studies, while also validating the usefulness of studying it as another popular culture text, economic system, and location of fan activity. Professional wrestling studies should welcome those interested in what

professional wrestling is, how it works, who likes it, where it happens, why it happens, when it works, and more.

Such has been, and continues to be, the nature of professional wrestling studies. Leverette discusses different approaches in popular culture studies to suggest how “these various disciplines that will help us, each in their own way, find an answer to the question: why wrestling?” (19). Professional wrestling studies has multi-method and multi-perspective opportunities. The multitude and variety of texts that constitute professional wrestling invite interdisciplinary work that welcome and invite different theories, methods, disciplines, and methodologies. Given the interactive nature of professional wrestling, studying it should also invite the perspectives from the wrestlers themselves, and invite fans to also serve as informed analysts and critics. Professional wrestling studies is interdisciplinary, and needs an interdisciplinary community to legitimize it.

### Introducing the Professional Wrestling Studies Association

In March of 2017, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Matt Foy, Chris Medjesky, and Kathie Kallevig met during the Central States Communication Association to discuss the possibility of organizing such an interdisciplinary community to help legitimize the study of professional wrestling. Since then, and along with other scholars around the world, we have worked to develop the Professional Wrestling Studies Association. The Professional Wrestling Studies Association (henceforth PWSA) is intended to provide this organizing force, whereby it would connect international professional wrestling studies researchers together—wherever they are located, at whatever level of their academic career they are in, and even if they are more fan than scholar. Coming together in such an organization, to connect and share, should help further the cause of legitimizing professional wrestling studies.

Overall, the intention of the PWSA is to help academics, fans, and professionals organize around the study of professional wrestling to share their work and support one another, and thereby work towards the legitimization of the field. We are completing a series of steps designed to incrementally accomplish that goal. This process began with the construction of a website, blog, and Twitter account; the next step was the development of this special edition of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, which we hope will lead to our creating an international journal dedicated to professional wrestling studies.

First, we created a website and blog for multimedia and multimodal presentations of content produced by academics, fans, and professionals. Found at [prowrestlingstudies.wordpress.com](http://prowrestlingstudies.wordpress.com), the website/blog serves the primary goal by providing a central space to collect such content and a process for legitimizing such content through peer-reviewed curation. Curated content would promote professional wrestling studies through scholarship and criticism that utilizes a variety of theories, methodologies, and methods from a range of fields and disciplines to describe, interpret, analyze, and critique the multitude of texts associated with professional wrestling (such as, but not limited to, matches, wrestlers, promoters, federations, marketing, fans, fan activities). Curated content undergoes a peer-review process on this open access website/blog to help scholars legitimize the study of professional wrestling.

Along with this curated content, we encourage content providers to engage in a new form of scholarly communication by adding a procedural publishing process to this open-access, peer-reviewed process. This publishing process involves the sharing of drafts for open-editing, constructive reviewing that demonstrates for young scholars and non-scholars the scholarship process from idea through draft to final product. Furthermore, along with the curated content and procedural publishing process, content providers are encouraged to produce creative nonfiction through embracing more multimedia and multimodal presentations; such

presentations could serve as public scholarship, working to bridge the gap between academic, fan, and professional perspectives.

Second, the PWSA will produce an online, open-access journal. Such a journal would maintain the integrity of the peer-review process, but could also bring in more fan-based or professional criticisms of professional wrestling, thereby replicating the other content options from the website/blog. The journal's publication schedule would also rely on interest and amount of content. The goal would be to produce an issue at least once a year to coincide with the world's largest pro-wrestling event, WWE's WrestleMania.

Third, to further legitimize the field of professional wrestling studies, work will be undertaken to align the PWSA with the traditional conceptualization of an association. This alignment entails the concretization of leaders, a constitution and bylaws, and a determination of annual meetings, such as symposiums or conferences. The editorial board gathered to oversee the website/blog, and any subsequent journal, will begin the process towards creating a traditional association the summer of 2018.

Finally, the PWSA will sponsor academic events related to professional wrestling studies. Currently, there is a Wrestling Studies Area at the Midwest Popular Culture/American Culture Association. Furthermore, people have organized one-day symposiums on professional wrestling, and hopefully connecting people via the PWSA would facilitate the organization of more such symposiums. Others have also expressed interest in organizing a conference in relation to WrestleMania. Another approach could be to organize a conference in relation to a pop cultural convention, such as the Comic Arts Conference that used to run in conjunction with the San Diego Comic-Con. These options should all be discussed and considered, and hopefully the PWSA can help with such organizing, and potentially even be the main organizing force should sufficient interest emerge.

## Why Study Professional Wrestling?

As with any academic field of study, its utility comes in what the studies can tell us about the practices, performances, and people of the contemporary world. The metaphoric nature of professional wrestling exemplifies this possibility, as the choreography, “mini-plays or dramas of events significant to spectators,” the symbolism and stereotypes all provide for fertile points of entry for comparison and criticism (Ball 4). Professional wrestling exists as “a platform for articulating the priorities of the community. Its basic morality play form, the symbolic nature of characters, all can be used as political satire or even a rallying cry for community mobilization” (Souther 271). The mythologies of professional wrestling are both larger than life and life itself.

Professional wrestling can present a microcosm of contemporary peoples, communities, cultures, and societies to highlight norms and tensions that exist in the larger reality beyond the squared circle. What follows are contemporary issues and entities that professional wrestling can help us understand:

Studying how professional wrestling utilizes digital communication technologies like social media can help build on the study of convergence culture and the importance of these technologies for businesses and people’s everyday lives. For example, understanding the actions of the WWE can illuminate how multinationals and monopolies operate in the 21st century, and particularly how entertainment conglomerates maximize their control over traditional and digital mediums.

Understanding the contexts and practices of professional wrestling can illuminate our understanding of politics, such as examining Donald J. Trump’s political actions through the lens of kayfabe, deconstructing the nationalism and racism in the 2017 Jinder Mahal push, or looking at the Divas Revolution as a matter of gender politics. Studying how kayfabe is

constructed, for example, can help democracies in the 21st century contend with issues of fake news and disinformation campaigns.

Professional wrestling is a transcultural and transnational text, and can thus help us understand global cultures. It is starting to make inroads in Abu Dhabi, Jordan, China, India, Germany, Brazil, and other countries around the world. The United Kingdom, Mexico, and Japan have long histories of their own unique approaches to professional wrestling. The WWE has drawn on these different nations and cultures through their tournaments, like the Mae Young Classic and the Cruiserweight Classic. Promotions such as NJPW and shows like *Lucha Underground* bring together wrestlers from around the world. Because of the internet, fans can see wrestling from around the world.

These three areas of business, politics, and globalization represent just some ideas for how professional wrestling studies and the PWSA could aid in our understanding of this pop cultural phenomenon. Studying the texts and contexts of professional wrestling, within an interdisciplinary community, could shed light on the various phenomena and practices of pop culture and beyond.

### This Special Issue

For this special issue, in the interest of maximizing a diversity of voices, our editorial vision is to provide shorter essays that collectively add momentum in favor of an emerging interdisciplinary field of interest. Overall, the range of works collected in this special edition demonstrates the interdisciplinary and public engagement philosophies underlying the PWSA.

Eero Laine provides an overview of professional wrestling studies and argues for scholars embracing the concept of “kayfabe” in other disciplines. Garret Castleberry considers the different disciplinary and methodological approaches to understanding professional wrestling.

Catherine Salmon discusses how to apply various psychological theories to understand the cast of characters that comprise professional wrestling. Karen Corteen presents critical criminology as a theoretical approach for understanding the problems associated with the WWE, and perhaps professional wrestling in general. Gabriela I. Morales and Mario A. Dozal examine professional wrestling from an education-entertainment perspective to argue that audiences can learn health messages from its various texts.

Matt Foy advocates for increased scholarly attention at the micro level of individual characters and storylines by studying political storytelling. John Quinn and Carolina Silveira demonstrate how to apply multimodal discourse analysis to understand the various relations that pervade and sculpt this form of popular culture entertainment. J. H. Roberts and Dominic Sevieri utilize thing theory to unpack the importance placed on the championship belt in professional wrestling. Rasmus Bysted Møller and Thomas Klintøe Laursen draw on sociological theories to argue that professional wrestling allows both audiences and wrestlers to experience the excitement of medieval style battle, only in a more civilized manner.

Jack V. Karlis draws on uses and gratifications theory to report on a survey of WWE fans to explain why these viewers use social media as part of their fandom. John Heppen and David Beard examine how local, independent professional wrestling can challenge more traditional notions of masculinity. Timothy Bavluka analyzes various contemporary professional wrestlers to argue that they reflect horror genre tropes and conventions. Dan Mathewson provides insight into the importance of class-based ideologies circulating around professional wrestling in the Southern United States.

Fan Joe Belfeuil offers a historical overview of New Japan Professional Wrestling and makes a case for the importance of the organization. Fan-scholar Christopher J. Olson provides interviews with indie wrestlers and promoters who discuss how social media impacts

professional wrestling. In the final section, in conjunction with PCSJ, we demonstrate the growing market of interest through a showcase of pro wrestling-focused reviews that include academic and general interest books, documentaries, video games, podcasts, and historic wrestling events.

Hopefully by the end of this volume, after considering the work of this interdisciplinary community, you will no longer be asking “why professional wrestling studies?”—instead, you will be saying “why *not* professional wrestling studies?”



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