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Defining Kayfabe: A Dialogue Among Pro-Wrestling Professionals and Academics

The Academics

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard (Ph.D., Ohio State University) is a Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Dominican University. She was the inaugural president of the Professional Wrestling Studies Association.

Christopher A. Medjesky (Ph.D., Bowling Green State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Findlay. His research focuses on the rhetoric of media in areas such as professional wrestling, film, and comedy.

Aris Emmanouloudis (Ph.D., University of Amsterdam) is the Coordinator of the Games Art & Animation Department at SAE Amsterdam. He has published research on the cultures of professional wrestling, and he has worked as a pro-wrestling journalist.

The Professionals

Terrance Griep wrestles as Tommy “The SpiderBaby” Saturday and has been recognized by *OUT Magazine* as America’s first openly gay professional wrestler. Having wrestled for nearly twenty years, he has claimed over a dozen championships and writes creatively under the unlikely penname Terrance Griep.

Cory Strode is a pro-wrestling journalist for *Pro Wrestling Insider*. He is also a podcaster, webcomics writer, and all-around comic book nerd.

Joe Ciupik is a Digital Media Production Specialist for Two Tree Creative in Rosemont, Minnesota. He is a former producer for American Wrestling Association (AWA).

Introduction

Presented in this article is a discussion between the academics and the professionals toward understand the definition of kayfabe and how kayfabe has changed over the last century of professional wrestling. This discussion was organized especially for this special issue on kayfabe and considers how to understand kayfabe in professional wrestling and beyond. Across this discussion about the past, present, and potential future of kayfabe, the participants considered how kayfabe operates as a co-construction or collaboration between the audience and the performers. Academic and professional perspectives on kayfabe both reflected this common theme and, potentially, common definition.

From both insider and outsider perspectives, kayfabe emerged from the interaction of audience and performers engaging in their respective roles. In a sense, then, the reason for kayfabe’s change over time could be seen as resulting from changes in the expectations

and norms of those roles. Seeing kayfabe as existing in the actions of audience and performer alike helps explain why kayfabe has not died, but has rather expanded, morphed, mutated, and adapted to the changes in professional wrestling and the broader historical, material, social, and cultural contexts in which it exists.

This conversation occurred on October 14, 2021, via Zoom and has been revised for publication to augment the conversation with citations. The discussion focused on addressing the basic questions, presented by moderator CarrieLynn D. Reinhard. Each discussant was asked to respond to the questions, and they were given the space to expand upon their answers as well as to respond to each other's comments. The conversation was recorded and the audio track transcribed using Zoom's in-program features. To retain the conversational feel of the discussion, explanations and citations are provided in footnotes to allow those interested to locate such additional sources of information and learn more about the concepts under discussion. The conversation has been edited for space and clarity, removing pauses and tangents and allowing the discussants to review and explain something said that perhaps was not properly captured and transcribed by Zoom.

This article presents the discussion, turn for turn, as it occurred, with subheads added to highlight the question being addressed in that specific section.

The Definitions of Kayfabe

CarrieLynn Reinhard (CR): On kayfabe as a concept, we wanted to get different perspectives beyond just academic ones, because academics have ideas, but they are not the only ideas and definitely sometimes not the most important ideas. Three people at different stages of their academic career, as well as three people with more of a professional relationship with professional wrestling, come to this conversation. The idea is to talk about kayfabe and understand different approaches to understanding kayfabe: what kayfabe is and what we can do with it. I thought we could just begin by going around the room and describing how you define kayfabe. When you hear that word, what comes to mind?

Terrance Griep (TG): Obviously kayfabe has changed a lot, which I guess is foreshadowing some of the other questions here. My own thought on contemporary kayfabe—and we can talk historically too, if you like—is just that it is a simple synonym for the willing suspension of disbelief, the old theatrical concept. Ultimately, what kayfabe is from a wrestler's perspective is selling your finish; it is making the end of your match seem believable, and everything you do that contributes to that effort. So, as a wrestler, you present your gimmick when there are people around. You do not show up at the same venue in the same car with your archenemy, that kind of thing. Anything that is going to interfere with the fans' enjoyment of what we are presenting is the opposite of kayfabe. Obviously, the word itself is carnie for "fake," with the implication being there that it is not a legitimate

competition.¹ But I am not sure anyone ever believed that it was. Audiences want to give themselves over to this illusion. It is somewhere between frustrating and insulting when we as performers do things that remove this illusion. Something that drives me nuts as a wrestler on the indie scene is seeing somebody who wrestles in the second match of the card, and then I see him milling up and down the aisle with the fans, going to the bathroom and yucking it up. But no one wants to think that we are just here at a show; they want to believe we wrestlers are larger than life figures, and to diminish ourselves in front of the audience dilutes that experience, I think. That is where the value of kayfabe is today, keeping that experience as close to “real” as possible, because these days, I think the most intriguing part of wrestling is where reality ends and illusion begins, and vice versa.

Cory Strode (CS): For those who do not know, I cover wrestling for *PW Insider*, and I see it the same way I see actors on a soap opera.² You do not watch a soap opera to see the persona drop, and the actor look at you in the camera and say “now, this part is based on this.” No, you give yourself over to the story. Terrence plays a part; his character is based on him in some ways; in some ways it is not. It depends. Are they really fighting? No, but you could get hurt in the same way that a stunt man gets hurt. Is the story based on reality? Well, in the same way that every writer brings forth parts of their life to add to what they are creating. It is the same as an actor on stage or in a movie or anything like that. It is this line that you understand where reality ends and this fictional world where everything is settled in a ring by two people fighting or four people fighting—or with AEW up to twenty-four people. I see wrestling as any other sort of fictional storytelling. You accept the tropes of the storytelling, and you accept what they are doing as a reality that may or may not be tangentially related to ours. Much in the same way when I read a James Bond book, James Bond is not a real person, but Ian Fleming took parts of his life and put them into the story. The best example is the whole poker game in *Casino Royale* being based on him and his friend at a casino going, “You know, let's make this more interesting; let's pretend that the other people at the table are Russian spies and we have to take their money to stop whatever nefarious thing they are doing.”

Chris Medjesky (CM): I am with CarrieLynn, and I am going to steal some of her thunder. For me kayfabe is about that co-constructed place of reality between the wrestler and the

¹ For more on this connection, see: Eero Laine's *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, Routledge, 2020; and Shannon Bow O'Brien's *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency: Professional Wrestling Rhetoric in the White House*, Palgrave, 2020.

² For more on this connection, see Heather Levi's “Sport and Melodrama: The Case of Mexican Professional Wrestling” in *Social Text*, no. 50, 1997, pp. 57-68; and, J. D. Pratten's “Professional Wrestling: Multi-Million Pound Soap Opera of Sports Entertainment” in *Management Research News*, no. 26, is. 5, 2003, pp. 32-43.

audience.³ What's really important is everybody playing a role there. The wrestlers can disrupt that sense of disbelief, and the audience can choose to do it, too. Frankly, as a fan, I get more annoyed when the audience does that than when the wrestlers do it because I feel like that is my portion of it. I feel like they are not playing their role properly whenever they break kayfabe. I think that is an important part of what I do not like about wrestling today. As fans we are all kind of playing in a way that is meaningful to everyone, and so I think it is important to add, at least in this conversation, the role that the audience plays in preserving or disrupting that kayfabe.⁴ And yet fans can be some of the worst perpetrators in destroying kayfabe. I always wonder why. There are different levels of smart fans that we run into. And there are some that just sit there, not playing their part, and I want to say: why are you a fan? Why? Why is this something you want to do? Why do you want to disrupt? Why do you spend all this time, this money, and just your life invested in the product that you not only seem to hate but want to disrupt and destroy? It has always bothered me, but I think it highlights the significance of the audience in kayfabe.

Joe Ciupik (JC): I think there are actually two definitions of kayfabe: there is old school kayfabe and the new version of today. Old school was the boys did not ride together in the same car from town to town. They did not share hotel rooms. They did not appear in public with each other. What happened in the ring extended to their personal lives. Kayfabe today is a speck of dust compared to what it was. Kayfabe is, for all intents and purposes, dead. The boys will still do their carnie talk or their kayfabe inside the ring, but I am sure that this has waned from back in the day. I mean kayfabe started to die in the early 1990s when Vince McMahon let the cat out of the bag. I guess, let me rephrase what I initially said: there is only one version of kayfabe, and that was what it used to be before Vince destroyed it.⁵ It is dead now. You can go on the Internet, and you can find out who is going to be wrestling who in a month from now or the angle that they are going for. As a fan back in the day, you had to watch the matches. The promoters gave you a nice nudge as to what was going to happen, but you still needed to figure it out for yourself. Back then, if you happened to go to a bar or a restaurant after those matches, you did not see a Bruiser Brody and Jerry Blackwell with the Sheik's Army after the Army turned on Blackwell. You did not

³ For more on the co-construction of kayfabe, see CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's "Kayfabe as Convergence: Content Interactivity and Prosumption in the Squared Circle" in CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson's edited collection *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, Routledge, 2019.

⁴ For interesting work on applying play concepts to professional wrestling, see Shane M. Toepfer's Ph.D. dissertation *The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks* from Georgia State University, 2011: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_diss/33.

⁵ For more on this story, see David Bixenspan's article "Thirty years ago, WWE Admitted it Wasn't a Sport to Try and Dodge Regulation" from *Deadspin*, February 15, 2019, <https://deadspin.com/thirty-years-ago-wwe-admitted-it-wasnt-a-sport-to-try-1832640826>.

see them sitting in the corner booth at a Perkins having a bunch of pancakes. If they did such a thing, I guarantee you Verne Gagne was going to boot one of them out, if not both of them. That is just the way business was done in all of the territory for kayfabe. But that is no longer the case. And I get it. I understand it. The cat is out of the bag, the genie is out of the bottle, and you cannot put it back in.

Aris Emmanouloudis (AE): I see kayfabe as a contract, an unwritten contract, that involves a process between the performers and the audience. The performers and the audience have to play their respective roles; in the case of the audience, most of the time knowingly but also unknowingly. Yes, they have to, both of them, play the roles assigned to them.⁶ It is a formality, one that you do not really care about it, but you will be annoyed if it is not there, if one day it disappears. Yet, depending on the company they are working for, wrestlers do not always seem to care about convincing fans. What I am trying to say is that fans might not bother too much about it, if kayfabe is not there, as long as it happens outside the magic circle of the performance. Nowadays you see wrestlers going on social media and participating with their everyday normal names. However, if kayfabe is broken during a performance, this will be very, very wrong. I am talking about examples like the Madison Square Garden incident where the heels and the faces hugged each other during the performance.⁷ Fans became upset at that event. Also, breaking kayfabe is accepted only when it is broken for a good purpose. What I mean is that when they have those cancer awareness campaigns in WWE, and you see heels and faces all standing next to each other, and you have the person that you hate mortally standing next to you.⁸ In that particular moment of time, fans do not really seem to be annoyed by the break in kayfabe because wrestlers are fighting for a greater purpose. Same with the post-9/11 *SmackDown* episode where everybody came out on stage for the moment of silence, or when celebrating someone whose career is about to end, like Ric Flair. It is acceptable to break kayfabe under those conditions during performance, and breaking kayfabe is accepted outside of performances so that wrestlers are free to do whatever they want with their own personas and personalities.

CR: Chris already talked about some of my approach to kayfabe, and how I see it as this negotiation that needs both the audience and the wrestlers playing their parts to make it

⁶ For more on what this work entails, see Tyler Brunette and Birney Young's "Working Stiff(s): A Theory of Live Audience Labor Disputes" in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, no. 36, 2019, pp. 221-34; and, R. Tyson Smith's "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling" in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, no. 71, is. 2, 2008, pp. 157-76.

⁷ For more on this incident, see this review from *Bleacher Report*: <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/986789-wwe-a-look-back-at-the-infamous-curtain-call-the-msg-incident>.

⁸ For more on the contemporary WWE and their fans, see Dru Jeffries' edited collection *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, Indiana University Press, 2019.

happen. But I will say that the reason why I actually became a professional wrestling fan in 2014 is because my partner, Christopher Olson, mentioned the way of looking at professional wrestling and kayfabe as a hyperreality. Hyperreality is this academic idea that says we have this construction of a reality and we are trying to portray that reality as real, but we know it is fictional.⁹ We know that it is constructed, that it may be based in objective reality, but it is someone's subjective interpretation of that objective reality. That idea is what fascinated me, and I began thinking about professional wrestling as existing in this hyperreal space. But to me, the difference between like wrestling and a play or a movie is the fact that oftentimes it is meant to be occurring in real time, so this hyperreality has to be functionally created in real time by individuals who are really good at improv. They must be able to sell their performance in the moment. What I also find interesting with that approach to kayfabe, and how you are creating this fictional reality in real time, is how much it also relates to all of us these days, and how we may be performing a way that we want people to see us. We do so to get over: to get the job, the love, the money. We do the hustle, whatever it is, in real time. Especially when you look at social media and how we put on all these different masks and performances to essentially survive in the world today.¹⁰

Comparing Kayfables

CR: I definitely do not see kayfabe now as what it was in the past, and so now I am going to segue into thinking about these comparisons. I think the kayfabe that I see when I watch AEW—and I have gone back and rewatched all of *Being the Elite* for an essay I wrote¹¹—and I have noticed how they have aspects of kayfabe coming in. They definitely have times where they are putting on performances, and there will be times where they break that performance with laughter, or they wink at the camera, and they are giving those knowing fourth wall breaks, so that you, the fan, know they are breaking kayfabe. But the one thing that they never really seem to break kayfabe on is in declaring that the matches are real. They may wink and nod and let people in on the fact that we all know that everything is pre-determined or fictional or whatever—creating almost a post-postmodern kayfabe. However, they really want to keep the illusion that the matches are not predetermined; that seems to be a big thing for AEW. So, how do you see kayfabe having changed over

⁹ For more on professional wrestling as a hyperreality, see Reinhard and Olson's *Convergent Wrestling*, and Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden's edited collection *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, Routledge, 2017.

¹⁰ For more on the relationship between professional wrestling and the theories of Erving Goffman, see Kelsie Weavill's master's thesis *Breaking Kayfabe: Professional Wrestling in the Key of Erving Goffman* from the University of Huddersfield in 2020; and, Michael R. Ball's Ph.D. dissertation *Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture: The Case of Professional Wrestling* from the University of Nebraska in 1989.

¹¹ For this essay, see Reinhard's "Being the Elite (Khan, 2019-Present)" in Simon Bacon's edited collection *Transmedia Cultures: A Companion* from Peter Lang, 2021.

time? And do you think it is different? Do you think that it is adapting now, if it still exists, or is it just an aspect of the past?

TG: I suppose, if you want to think of it in tarot card ways, you know death does not mean death, necessarily. It means change; it means one thing dying, and something else taking its place. Maybe that is one way to think of kayfabe. The old territory system could use the old kayfabe method. They were created for each other, and you could work the same match town after town after town after town. Now—and this probably goes back to cable TV when Vince really just took the territory paradigm and made it national—but, now, kayfabe had to go away. Because you could not keep that con, if you want to think of it in those terms, going because the new exposure brought by cable TV and then the Internet.¹² I just imagine people trying to maintain kayfabe like a masked wrestler today. Could you get away with that? I read in Bobby Heenan’s autobiography that I think it was Dr. X who would leave a venue with his mask on and then wait till he was in a middle of a cornfield in Nebraska before he would take it off. And if you try doing that today, three kids would jump out from behind the corn stalks and yell “gotcha!” The fans think there are a lot smarter than they are. I know that is part of the fun. I am endlessly fascinated by the notion when I hear wrestling podcasts or whatever talk about “well, this guy should have gone over. The other guy should have gone over. What have you done with him? He cannot afford to lose another match!” And those sorts of things. I just think that that would never have happened in the old system. It could not have. It would have been “can you believe that big guy finally got pinned by the little guy?! I did not see that coming!” That that kind of thing, even if people understood that this wasn’t 100% legitimate. Look at Wilbur Snyder versus Warren Baku: they will just do a drop toe hold and then hold it for five minutes. I remember seeing that exact match years ago and thinking “gosh I wish I could get away with that. I wish I could do that.” But I would get booed out of the building with go-away heat, not heel heat. As wrestling changes, kayfabe must change right along with it. I see what wrestling is becoming with all the backflips and all the just showing off for the sake of the audience, and I think how long can we keep up shifting, athletically? Maybe reverting to something a little more traditional, with the bad guys acting like bad guys again, might be helpful.

CR: Maxwell Jacob Friedman seems to always be a heel, no matter where he is.

CS: Even if it is flipping off a seven-year-old who asked for his autograph. And the kid’s parents are “oh, I cannot believe he would do that!” But those of us who have been wrestling fans forever are like, well, yeah he is a heel.

¹² For more on the history of professional wrestling, see Scott Beekman’s *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling*, Praeger, 2006.

CM: I think back to like when Sasha Banks was most popular but she was signing autographs with a rubber stamp. Pure heel heat.

JC: I think kayfabe is in a generational transitional period. Anyone that was born before the turn of the century still knows and recognizes what kayfabe is. Anybody born after them does not know what kayfabe is. When I talk about the general generational transition, I think after I am long gone man—I am 56, hopefully I have got another, you know, thirty to forty years left in me—by the time my six-month-old granddaughter—if, for whatever reason, she becomes a wrestling fan—she and her generation will watch it as they would a TV show or a movie or a play. They do not look at the mystique of the bad guy and the good guy are going at it. They look at what happens in the ring and if the wrestler can cut a promo; they look to see if the wrestlers can get over with the audience. I use Tom Cruise movies as an analogy. When anybody walks into a movie theater, and they see Tom Cruise—who is in great shape, but he's an almost-sixty-year-old guy right now; when you watch him repel down the tallest building in the world in Dubai, do they say that is fake, that could never happen. No. They get immersed in the action; it is an escape. Right now, even this discussion, it is a transitional discussion between what was and what it is going to be. That is just where it is at, and that is why I say kayfabe is dead. Well, maybe it is on life support, but they just do not want to pull the plug type of thing. As I tell anybody when they find out I have been involved in wrestling for thirty-six years, just enjoy it. Just watch it. If you are not entertained by it, that is fine. There are some movies out there that people have glowing reviews about, yet I think they are horrible. It is all a matter of opinions, whether you like it, or maybe you like baseball, or maybe you like football. It is a personal preference thing.

CS: You talked a little about the *Being the Elite* and them treating the endings of matches as if they are serious. I think they brought that over from New Japan Pro Wrestling, where the idea in Japan is: yes, it is pre-determined; yes, it is a show; but, when it gets to the ending of the match, the fighting spirit takes over. And the person who wins has the better fighting spirit. The audience has kind of accepted that as their version of kayfabe. The Young Bucks spent a lot of time in Japan; Kenny Omega lived in Japan. So, with All Elite especially, they want to kind of bring that idea to it, where, “yeah, wink wink nudge nudge, we know it is a show but ...” One other thing I wanted to mention after what Joe was talking about with Tom Cruise: I used to help out my friend at his comic shop. This was during the WWE Attitude Era, so we would have on the TV screen *Monday Night Raw*. We would be watching it and every so often, someone would come up with a stack of comics, look up at the TV, and they would go, “You guys know that is fake, right?” As they are reading about

Spider-Man and Star Wars and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Yet they felt compelled to tell us “You know that is fake, right?” to the point where it became a joke.

AE: To speak about the idea of kayfabe changing, and also going back to the perception of kayfabe as a contract: I think it is a contract that is very strict and specific, but its application depends on it being flexible, and it depends on the promotion. I want to bring an example here. There is a promotion that has been thriving and gaining popularity: Gato Move ChocoPro.¹³ They produce these weekly shows that they put on YouTube for free every week. The promotion is run by Emi Sakura, who now wrestles for AEW. The idea of the promotion is that it is utterly twisted kayfabe. Even the rules about where wrestling takes place are twisted because they have this very small room, and they have just put a mat in the room. They have all sorts of crazy gimmicks and props around the room, and they do all sorts of wild stuff. What I have noticed from their chat history next to the streaming page is that the audience is very happy to play along. Even though the wrestlers willingly break kayfabe all the time—such as after the show is over they bring the entire roster on to have the rock-paper-scissors contests or they have cooking streams or they do all sorts of crazy, entertaining stuff—the audience is so hooked on it. The audience does not care, and it goes back to what Joe said earlier about being entertained by pretending kayfabe is real.

CM: I mean, I see that, and I think they are pretending kayfabe is alive. But it is so ridiculous. An outsider could not possibly believe that no one is going walk up to that and be like, “You know that is fake, right?” because it is so obviously fake, whereas traditional professional wrestling where kayfabe was maintained, it was a reasonable question that a person might get asked. But in the world of wrestling a mop that we see sometimes, that sort of thing is so obviously fake that they are pretending to maintain kayfabe. I think that ultimately gets to what my biggest problem with the fans is. There is an audience role and there is a wrestler role in wrestling, and the audience feels that they are more storytellers now. They want to be more Vince Russo than what they would really let Russo be. They want to be the ones to book the matches; they want to be the ones that they are just so close to being in that ring without being in that ring. And now they are overstepping their bounds, and so they do things like pretend like all this is really good. They want heightened flip flops and all those things, and we get a world in which Joey Ryan’s dick flips happened. Fans are supposed to pretend that that is real, and I just think that is a different thing almost at this point then wrestling. And I have a hard time understanding how the same

¹³ Their YouTube channel can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2HtPsU4U7TNSv2mSbPkjow>.

fans reconcile that because they will cheer for the dick flips, and they will go crazy when somebody DDTs a mop and pins in the middle of the floor, or there is an entire wrestling match of the blow-up doll. They will maintain the performance of fan who believes in kayfabe—but at the same time, when wrestlers are actually trying, the fans will boo them. And they will not maintain kayfabe whenever things are more realistic and then, at the same time, those same people will then sit there and be like “William Regal really should have been world champion.” He did holds! He would do a headlock for 35 minutes! He went to a time limit draw for fifteen years on purpose because it worked. Those same wrestling fans doing all three things are really sort of three different sets of wrestling fans or people occupying different spaces. How are they negotiating various versions of kayfabe as they look at the slightly different variations of the same wrestling product? I personally cannot do it. As a fan, I cannot look at the cinematic matches when they happened at *WrestleMania 36*. I sat there with my son, and I said, buddy, I think this is it, I think this is the end of professional wrestling. Anyway, point being is I do not understand how people do it. I am of the opinion that you are right: we can only go so far in terms of how many flips we can do in a match, how high those flips can go, how many times can they rotate in the air. There is a limitation to the human body, how far they can twist, how far they can fall. We are so long past the time when a DDT was a finisher. Now anything short of pulling out a knife and stabbing them seems like it is not a finisher anymore. We either must go down the hill backwards to where we were, or it is just going to keep escalating to a hyperbolic level. If it keeps escalating, I am out; it is just not for me anymore.

JC: Do not abandon it. Here is what I will tell you. What you watch on TV, I agree with what you said 100%. Go support the indies. Go support the wrestlers that are going to be on TV in six months, a year, or in a couple of years from now. From my experience of producing indie wrestling, watching it from the inside, watching it as a fan, it is sort of a cross between WWE and old school because they are not on a time limit. When you are watching TV, when Roman Reigns goes into the ring, he knows he only has to go for twelve minutes and then the referee is going to tell him “okay, let’s go home.” Vince or the company wants them to do so much in that short period of time; that is why the bar has been raised so high. I have become disillusioned with watching (especially the WWE), but if you go to an indie show, there is no time limit. They are going to have five to eight matches, whatever it might be, and they will try to get done in two hours to try to keep it in a standard movie time limit. But if they go over, that is okay; they are not under that stress of getting it done within a time limit. Going in and supporting indie wrestling gives the true wrestling fan a taste of maybe what they once had as an eight-year-old and believing it at that age. Indie wrestling still provides a little bit of that for me, but even AEW is doing a better job, in my opinion, than WWE. However, there are certain

limitations: AEW has got such a large roster. Chris, you made the comment earlier about how the bar has been raised, about how extreme can wrestling get? And I will use the genie in a bottle analogy again: it is tough to go back to the toe holds and the head locks for two minutes. I mean those days are dead, even in the indie scene, because we have become a microwave-takes-too-long-to-cook-my-food world. It is just a reality.

AE: They still do them in Japan, though, I think.

JC: And I am glad that that is the case, but here in the United States? Forget it. Again, even in the indies, the guys are working to get to AEW or the WWE, and so they are doing the flips. It becomes a gymnastics show as much as it is a wrestling show.

CM: I feel very strongly about the time factor. With WCW, they had *WCW Saturday Night*, they had a pay-per-view every other month. I think they had one more show in actuality, but it was enough. You got to see talent spread out across the various areas, and it was quite exciting.

TG: The time thing is intriguing to me because that, basically, is what created kayfabe in the days when wrestling was 100% legitimate. You would have matches that would last five hours, and the audience would submit. They would be like, “I am sorry, but I got work tomorrow.” So, the Gold Dust Trio, they came up with “slam bang wrestling” where they went from something legitimate in terms of competition to something that was designed to entertain simply because audiences could not sit through all that wrestling. Now, here we are, a century later, going right back to it.¹⁴

JC: The world has certainly changed from a century ago, when wrestling was done under the big top. In most towns you did not have 237 entertainment options or 1,000 TV channels to watch, so it was an event when it came to your town, much like the circus or any carnival that may have come around. People had nothing else to do and might have been there, literally, for only entertainment. The talkies were just starting but not every neighborhood had a movie theatre. That is what made professional wrestling a big attraction: the circus came into town, people saw there is a wrestling show and that these guys are real. To go back to Terry, what he said earlier about having a leg hold for forty-five seconds or something, and this all ties back into kayfabe. It seemed real when a guy is doing that, when they are not doing all of this acrobatic stuff. Some of the things they are doing today would

¹⁴ For more on the Gold Dust Trio, check out this episode from *Cultaholic Wrestling* <https://podcasts.apple.com/kw/podcast/the-gold-dust-trio-wrestling-in-the-twenties-part-1/id1344913966?i=1000462280613>.

paralyze ninety-five percent of the population if it was really done. It is so over the top, kayfabe could not keep up. Even if Vince did not kill it in the early 1990s, kayfabe would still be dead today because of the evolution of professional wrestling in the ring, as well as the Internet and the information age.

CM: I wonder if it is a chicken and egg thing: did kayfabe die and wrestling change, or did wrestling change and kayfabe die? I do not know, but I think back to some of the most pivotal things to happen in professional wrestling in the past forty to sixty years was Bret Hart holding Steve Austin in that sharpshooter for an extra amount of time. I mean that was forever he held Stone Cold in there, and it was because of that, and that double turn, that really caused a monumental shift in wrestling. We saw that really birth the Attitude Era. I do not know how audiences would respond to that today. I just do not know because the type of wrestler that would do that the sort of thing exist out there—well, Bryan Danielson does a little bit, but I am not talking about the Hogan-esque type. I am talking about the sort of small technical guy.

CR: So, I am probably going to mark out a little bit on that one. I do think that the variety of what constitutes as a wrestling move these days allows for those types of holds and those types of technical wrestling. Along with the acrobatic style as well, the more lucha libre style. You are almost able to then heighten certain things to look more realistic like the holds. Again, AEW mark here, but you have like Thunder Rosa, Bryan Danielson, Daniel Garcia—these individuals can do other types of moves, but it is when they get so brutal with the holds that the audience at times will gasp. I think there is still that type of audience-wrestler interaction when we have those moves, and, again, it may just be AEW and indies as well. Because I have not watched WWE in several years at this point. It is just that the diversity of what is out there, I think, allows for the diversity of fans that are out there. So that, depending on who you are, you can emotionally engage with something and in doing so, even if it is just for that fleeting second or a couple of minutes, it becomes the most real, engrossing thing that you could see, just like in a movie when you are emotionally attached to the character. I think it is a very similar dynamic.

CS: I was going to say, one of the things that Ring of Honor did when they came back from the pandemic, they reinstated what ROH refers to as pure wrestling, which is hold for hold, not a lot of the flippy-dippy stuff; not a lot of high flying. It is very mat-based wrestling. It is very much the sort of stuff that we are talking about here as fans. Except now the hard thing about that is Ring of Honor has not been able to resume touring (and may be on hiatus for months). Because of the pandemic, and they were kind of in a down cycle before the pandemic because they lost so many of their wrestlers, they have instituted

this pure wrestling that is a very mat-based product. I think that is almost a reaction to other promotions. They started and eventually became an indie that does not have death matches. Then it was we do not have monster guys, we have wrestlers and now they are more pure wrestling against the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla lucha style that is popular with AEW, and it would be popular in WWE if Vince understood it, but he does not. No match on WWE TV can go more than like three minutes.

JC: If you include the walkouts, then it is ten minutes.

CS: Well, yeah, but I quit watching WWE when I realized that none of the matches are over four minutes unless you are watching a pay-per-view. If I want to watch people enter, I can go on YouTube. I want to watch a confrontation between two people about money, a title, or revenge. I get that with Ring of Honor. I get that with New Japan. And I get that with AEW. They all have very different styles. You have the strong style with New Japan. You have the mat-based style with Ring of Honor, and you have kind of a buffet with AEW, where they are doing a little of everything. For every Young Bucks, you have a Bryan Danielson or a CM Punk. They are going to bring that MMA, strong-style type to the ring. So, I think the different styles, they rise and fall over time.

AE: Funnily enough, all those Young Bucks, CM Punk, and Bryan Danielson, they all began from Ring of Honor. I think that even WWE wrestlers, in the house shows when they know it will not be televised and they know that they have more time to perform, sometimes they will also go a bit off script. I remember in 2016, there was this house show here in Amsterdam, and Cesaro was wrestling. At some point, his opponent was headfirst in the ropes, and everybody from the crowd started chanting “6-1-9! 6-1-9!” Now 619 is a banned move for anyone that is not Rey Mysterio. However, Cesaro performed the 619, something that he has never done on TV. From what I have read in other comments, because I was reading the results from the entire European tour, he performed this move in other cities as well. So, when it comes to non-televised, it is not really canon in WWE. When they know that they can go off script and get away with it, they will do it. That was just something that came to my mind now because we bash WWE—and sometimes rightfully so—but I think that the performers also try to find these small opportunities, small windows to express themselves differently. Like their social media presence. I also remember how shocked I was in the beginning, when wrestlers on Twitter was becoming a thing. Chris Jericho would go on Twitter and bash his opponent or call them a stupid idiot or whatever, but if someone

said “hey, Chris, I saw your match tonight, and it was really good,” he would reply politely to them.¹⁵

CM: I think your point is really to the larger conversation about what happened to kayfabe. I think it would be hard to disassociate what Vince did, and I am going to blame Vince specifically here, but I mean certainly Eric Bischoff would later play a role in it. TV used to exist to sell house show tickets. People would watch TV and then want to go to the show. It seemed that eventually Vince wanted people to buy tickets to watch TV and now he wants people to watch TV to buy into the intellectual property. I do not really think he cares if people watch the TV show or not, just as long as something drives them towards that intellectual property. But that all happened right around the same time period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I do not think you are wrong in thinking about how important those house shows were to maintaining kayfabe. There is the separation from being the mediated audience or the live audience, and that was a really important thing in what was kayfabe, this participating as an actual live audience members opposed to a mediated audience member. Those live shows are really an important part of what we are talking about here. The sort of death of those live shows contributed to the death of kayfabe, I would think.¹⁶

JC: Well, that is why I brought up earlier about hitting the indies because those are like shows not affiliated with the big boys, with the shows that are on TV.

CR: But the indies are increasingly recording to put things up on YouTube and are indeed now also producing live streaming of their pay-per-views. AAW here has done that. My partner and I both went to one that was being live streamed and then we watched one that was live streamed. So, they do have the time limit coming in that way, too, but another thing about the indies—and I think this goes back to what Chris was saying about the gimmicks—you have people like Orange Cassidy who started off in the indies doing a very particular gimmick that requires you to really buy into it to go along with what he does. You also have instances where Bryce Remsburg oversaw a match that had no one actually wrestling in it, so an invisible man match.¹⁷ That was again on the indie scene, so you do see these types of experimentation, innovation, degradation, whatever word you want to

¹⁵ For more on the impact of Twitter on professional wrestling, see Benjamin Litherland’s “Breaking Kayfabe is Easy, Cheap, and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling” in *Celebrity Studies*, no. 5, is. 4, 2014, pp. 531-33.

¹⁶ For more on the changing roles of audiences in professional wrestling, see Jon Ezell, “The Dissipation of ‘Heat’: Changing Role(s) of Audience in Professional Wrestling in the United States,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, edited by Broderick Chow, Claire Warden, and Eero Laine, Routledge, 2016, pp. 9-16.

¹⁷ This comment refers to the 2019 Game Changer Wrestling match: Invisible Man vs. Invisible Stan that can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cslu7zFmPjM>.

use, of kayfabe and trying to push the boundaries of how much the audience will accept and go along with what is real and what is not.

JC: No doubt about it. You are exactly right that a lot of the indies are trying to stream. They are trying to get an additional revenue stream in the door. Well, none of them have quit their day job, let us put it that way; they have shoot jobs. However, again, just in my experience and watching it, even if it is being recorded and put together on YouTube, not having that time restriction helps calm the acrobatic gymnastic approach to professional wrestling. They can go ahead and do that, but then they can also go down and do a leg lock—maybe not for a couple of minutes, maybe thirty seconds, just so that they are blowing up by that point. They need to catch up, but they cannot let you do that on WWE or any of the TV shows

CS: I am not going to get all my moves in, brother.

JC: To me part of kayfabe started to die already in the 1980s when Hogan's finishing move was a leg drop. Are you kidding me? Oh, even a little bit later than that, The Rock's finishing move in the '90s—come on.... And I get it: people, for whatever reason, they love that: hook, line and sinker. They get brought into the boat and skinned alive. But when you do stuff like that, after having the death matches where you have Mick Foley being chokeslammed off the top of the cage ... through the cage to the mat. And he still kicks out; yet, Hogan's or The Rock's finishing move, the guy does not kick out. I mean, come on. Wrestling has killed kayfabe itself. Yes, Vince did it, but the style of wrestling changed, and it killed itself. Hulk Hogan and the Road Warriors changed professional wrestling. I think that was the beginning of the end because it just started to change. You needed to be big, muscle-bound guys. And I love Animal and Hawk. I have worked with them a few times, but there was no science in the match. That was the beginning of kayfabe dying as that changed the perception of the audience when those three individuals appeared.

The Audience and Kayfabe

CR: I do have one last question that we could think through here that is related to things I was just hearing. I am going to preface it by saying one of the things that I think we are hearing is that certain fans like certain things, and the promoters might be feeding into that. So AEW might be feeding into one type of fan, while WWE is feeding into another type of fan, and so on and so forth. Just how important do you think it is for the fan to buy into professional wrestling? Does kayfabe still exist if the fans believe that it exists, even if the wrestlers are not really doing much to keep kayfabe alive? Are the fans doing enough to keep it alive?

TG: It's real to me, damn it!¹⁸ This ties into the point I want to make; it ties everything together, I think, the various components. First, I want to mention Chris's excellent point about Japanese toe holds. I think I could get away with doing a toehold for two minutes. I will do a figure four leg lock or various other related things simply because no one else does that stuff. If I am in there with some flippy kid, it is like, okay, I just took away your arsenal, now what are you going to do? We are going to wrestle, that is what we are going to do. When you set it up and you work with the audience, and they realize what I am doing, they will cheer and they will go "oh wow" even though I am generally the heel. And then you lock it in, and they are so excited to see this move that they recognize and no one else is using, at least locally. Then I make a point of getting the referee to do a check and see if my opponent wants to quit. I have got the figure four and what do I do? I reach behind the ref's back and grab that second rope. And I tell my opponent to sell. He throws his head back, and if he is doing a good job, he looks like Robert Shaw from the climax for *Jaws*. The audience will then start booing. They are in on the whole thing: like they cheer the move, but they know I am the bad guy and now the bad guy is cheating. And so the audience is keeping up with what I am doing in the ring—or, maybe I am keeping up with them, that might be another way of looking at it. But they will cheer the hold, and then they will go back to booing me when I started the cheating. It feels to me like maybe the audience is just that much more sophisticated, and that kayfabe just made a natural progression of sophistication.

CM: I think you are hitting on what I think ends up being an issue with kayfabe. The promoters, particularly Vince and some of the others, and as a result, the fans and some of the wrestlers, do not really know where they are at any moment. Like they do not know where they are in the storytelling process. So they do not know if they are supposed to buy into it or not; they do not know if they are supposed to be smart or not. Like when Kurt Angle went to Pittsburgh for the first time as a heel,¹⁹ and he did not believe that he would be booed. Let me assure you, I was there booing him, and I was happy to do it. Even though he was a childhood hero of mine, we knew where we were at that time, where the product was. The wrestlers knew where the product was; the promoters knew where the product was, and so the audience knew where the product was. And they sort of knew where they were going. I think that there is a lot of uncertainty right now. This gets a lot to what Joe was talking about: there is an uncertainty about where things are headed and what things

¹⁸ See Brian Jansen's "It's Still Real to Me': Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence" in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 50, is. 2, 2020, pp. 302-30; and Laine's "Kayfabe: Optimism, Cynicism, Critique." *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, edited by Sharon Mazer, Heather Levi, Eero Laine, and Nell Haynes, Seagull Books/University of Chicago, pp. 192-206.

¹⁹ For more on this incident, see this report from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's Cristina Rouvalis in 1999: <https://old.post-gazette.com/magazine/1999114angle2.asp>.

are. It causes so much confusion that there is a lot of frustration. What ends up happening with that is sort of my concern about kayfabe. I think if people committed to their roles, then what worked in, say, 1977 would work just as well today.

JC: I agree with everything that you said, but one of the things that you said expanded on my viewpoint. One of the other things that turns me off on wrestling is the turn or multiple turns from babyface to heel back to babyface back to heel. A turn is good but do not do it every six months—heck, do not even do it every year. If you are going to do a turn, look for a reason, not just for the sake of doing it because you need another heel or another babyface. Whatever the reason, make it worthwhile and memorable and, the last thing, make it count

CR: Even in that sense, what you are describing is similar to a story that has logic to it, and there are definitely a lot of TV shows and movies where, at some point, the logic is broken and the character suddenly does something that is out of character and makes no sense to the plot. There are some fans who will watch that, and they will hate it because of their emotional attachment to the characters and suddenly they are acting out of character. But then you will have fans who might watch something just because of the spectacle, and again I think that comes back to this idea that we have multiple types of fans watching for very different reasons. And for different fans, it could also then be different definitions of what they consider to be real. For me, the biggest heel turn was Tommaso Ciampa against Johnny Gargano because I was very invested in that story and that seemed real to me. But for others what might be real is watching to Nick Gage and Jon Moxley make each other bleed as much as possible. Whereas I can watch that, and I see that the hits are not necessarily landing the right way or that light tubes do not have powder in them to be real lights. So, I think there are different types of fans with different definitions of what real is.

JC: But having said that, a good heel turn or a good babyface turn, an impactful one is going to transcend the entire audience and maybe not 100% but I am going to put it into the low to mid or even high 90s. I was at the match when the Sheik's Army turned on Jerry Blackwell, and I guarantee you every single person in there became a fan. They started cheering for Jerry Blackwell; 99% of the people in that audience were cheering for Jerry Blackwell. That is why, going back to what I said earlier, do not do it just for the sake of doing it.

TG: Get a story. Make it character development.

AE: Having various definitions of real, I think, is a very positive element of the contemporary wrestling landscape. That there is something for everyone. There is so much

wrestling right now, and so many ways to consume it, which means that everybody can get what they are looking for. I think this is what I mean we say wrestling is dead, wrestling might not be mainstream, or mainstream wrestling has killed wrestling or whatever, but I think that there is so much wrestling right now that everyone can get what they are looking for. And to answer about the placement of kayfabe: I do not think that kayfabe is either alive or dead. It will appear when it has to be there, and it will die when we fans kill it, but we can never really get you know rid of it.

CS: How I want to end my thought of kayfabe is it in some ways is almost a match per match thing. I can watch one match and when I do my analysis for *PW Insider*, it is like okay these guys did this, this was the story of the match, I like this, I did not like this. But I can also watch and the match that always comes to mind was Kenny Omega and Okada. Three minutes into that match, I am not thinking about the performance. I am not thinking about where they are going next. I am not thinking about anything other than oh, my gosh, who is going to win? They have used their ability in the ring to create kind of—I think the best way to put it would be a kayfabe bubble, where I forget about anything else other than these two people want to win and they will do everything they can to do so in this hyperreality world between these ropes in this arena.

TG: And only one of them can win.

CS: Right, and somebody has to win. Because they have set it up that way. Another match was Kenny Omega and Bryan Danielson. On the one *AEW Dynamite*, I was covering it and I had to stop. Because I bought into the story. I completely gave myself over to it, and when you got that time limit draw, perfectly done. It was not Bryan has got to get Kenny in the hold and make it last for the next thirty-five seconds. It was more that they are there, they see that the time is running out, and they are both getting more frantic about having to win. And you buy into it. At that moment, it was pure kayfabe because I believed it. I did not go well, you know, Kenny Omega is not going to lose this match and Bryan Danielson cannot lose on his first show on public TV and on and on. It was, oh, my gosh, what is going to happen? And great performers create that, in the same way, like we talked earlier. The first time you saw *Die Hard*, did you think about the stunt work; did you think about who wrote the script; did you think about this actor's previous roles; did you think about how Bruce Willis cannot play action hero because he is this goofball on TV who just put out an album of crappy music? No, they won you with the story. When performers are good, no matter where they are, no matter what company they work for—whether it is at the VFW with fifty people or in a concert hall—you buy in if they do their job right, and I think that is the most important thing. They make that reality to where you buy in.

JC: Cory, I have talked to several locker rooms before doing a TV taping, mostly for the indie shows, and the single biggest thing that I tell any wrestler in any locker room is that they have one job to do for me: make me believe. Because if they can make me believe, then I know that the people that are in that audience or watching on the screen are going to believe. The version of kayfabe out there today will happen if the wrestlers in the ring can get you to believe that what is happening is real, which allows you to suspend all disbelief and be entertained and get into it and to boost somebody like Spider Baby. Then kayfabe is still alive. So it is not only the wrestlers themselves in the match, but it is the audience. It is a tag team that can keep kayfabe alive—the new version of kayfabe.

CM: I think what we are seeing now, though, is just more of an exaggerated version of what we saw. I think we do have some people buying into wrestling a blow-up doll. I think we do have people buying into that. Obviously, I have a preference, and I am obviously going to put it out there that that is stupid and I hate it and I wish it would have never existed.

CR: As we have said, the match is real. Those are two real people engaging in real athleticism that sometimes results in very real injury. The question then is to what extent is the audience going to buy into all the other parts of it.²⁰ If the performers, the wrestlers, are doing their job well enough when it comes to selling, it makes it a lot easier for the audience to buy into it. I think of it in terms of what I call entanglement and detachment. Like when you are watching a movie, you can become entangled in the movie and buy into it: it just hooks you and you go with the flow. Then maybe something happens, and you might detach from it, because you notice like all that special effect is not that special. So, you get detached from the movie but then, if you keep watching, something else might entangle you again. I have had that experience with professional wrestling, both mediated and live, where I see something does not totally work, but as long as the performers do not dwell on it and they do not make a big deal out of a whiff or a botch, then I can get entangled again. But it does require this kind of going back and forth between the audience and the wrestler for that perception of reality to be constructed and maintained.

CM: And so, just the academic in me throwing it out there for us to tease out in another day, but I think it is interesting that when we think about kayfabe, we are always thinking about protecting the real in the illusion of the real. We always have these conversations, if you look at the academic scholarship, for those of you that are academics, that is always focused on the real. We never ever focus on the intentionally fictional. That portion of the

²⁰ For more on the labor of professional wrestling, see Broderick Chow and Eero Laine's "Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling" in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, no. 19, 2014, pp. 44-53.

conversation never comes up. It might be simply because to do so would require us to have more access to the means of production for the actual matches than we probably do. But still, I think it is interesting, and if this conversation continues academically that might be a path to take.

CR: Well, just to piggyback on that, I do think part of that is similar to like fan studies. There has been decades worth now of fan studies research trying to legitimize being a fan. And I think because of the stereotypes associated with the wrestling fan as being a dupe and being a mark, there is this idea to try to focus on what is the real versus what is not real rather than understanding it more from like a media studies perspective as something fictional and something constructed. Instead of trying to compare professional wrestling to sports—which is like a factual entertainment?—we should just compare it to any other form of fictional entertainment.

CM: Probably right.

CR: I think we are trying, as academics and as fans of professional wrestling, to reclaim this idea that, hey, we are not idiots; we know what is real and what is not real. We are trying to tease that out to make professional wrestling fans look better to the general public.

CS: As a comic book nerd, I remember when I started, there was this whole thing—and it had been in science fiction as well. This need to legitimize our stuff, that science fiction needed to legitimize itself. And then, when it got on the bestseller list, fans say, “See, we are literature.” The same thing with comic books when we got *Maus* and *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*: “See, we are literature.” But the older I have gotten, the less I give a damn about that. Because eventually it seeps into the culture in its own way. Nothing needs to be legitimized because, in the end, nothing is really legitimate. You look at the bestseller list now. No one is going to be teaching that at a university in fifty years. You look at the non-fiction list, same thing. It is gimmicky. I think this focus *on we need to make ourselves legitimate* is an insecurity that eventually, over time, people just give up. I do not give a damn if people know I watch wrestling or read science fiction or read comic books or put up with Terrance at conventions. Because I no longer care what other people think. I think in a lot of ways, the whole *we need to legitimize this* goes away after time, and, in some ways, you can look at the Attitude Era when wrestling was hot. Nobody had to explain that they were a fan then. It is when it is not all that popular, like now, that people feel they need to explain why they are a fan. When something is popular, you do not need to explain anymore. So, maybe, just in our own minds, do not care if it is popular or not.

Everything is legitimate in the same way that watching a Bugs Bunny cartoon is just as good a way to learn about opera as watching an adaptation of it on PBS. It is all about the enjoyment of it. If it is an enjoyment and it does not hurt anybody, who cares if it is legitimate or not.

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