SELLING HEROES: TRANGRESSION AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

by

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Abstract:

In the past decade, American professional wrestling has moved from the fringes of mainstream entertainment to its centre, from a cult-favourite to a contemporary cultural phenomenon. This study consists of a series of interviews used to examine the shift in hero construction between two distinct periods in professional wrestling, the Golden Age and post-Golden Age of professional wrestling, to help explain the explosion of popularity of this extremely understudied cultural phenomenon. While the wrestling hero has always been the key source of transgression for the wrestling fan, it has been the proliferation of the most recent incarnation of the wrestling hero, the no-frills anti-hero hero which has been central to the most recent successes of professional wrestling kingpin Vince McMahon’s company “World Wrestling Entertainment” (WWE). This period reflects a fundamental shift in the sensibilities of the wrestling fan, and has helped take the appeal of “sports entertainment” to mainstream audiences. The purely physical and emotional spectacular nature of professional wrestling has expanded, rapidly occupying the cognitive dimension as well, as it appears that wrestling fans now more deeply identify with particular characterological features of favoured combatants. Building upon the theatric and athletic (mimetic) dimensions of professional wrestling, this paper explores the broader context of identity as an emerging basis for appeal to wrestling fans. Today’s version of professional wrestling represents the Rabelaisian Carnival more than ever, as the hero is now constructed around the notion of a challenge to the prevailing order and the oppressive nature of routine. The wrestling fanatic seems to identify with the hero and thus uses him to cope with his or her own frustrations, or even his or her oppression.
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"(Social) Conditions change sometimes beyond what you can do. You either rock with them or you die".

- Vince McMahon (Owner, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE))

Introduction:

A recent broadcast of professional wrestling featured a “wrestler” driving up to the “ring” in a large black pick-up truck armed with a fire hose attached to a tank that was apparently loaded with beer. In the ring was the owner of the franchise and a series of wrestling villains. The driver stopped the truck, jumped out and climbed into the back, at which point he proceeded to extinguish the corporate leader and his henchmen with his beer-dispensing hose. Following this, he opened up a series of beer cans, took one swig before hurling cans towards the ring, and finished off with his raised middle finger toward the ring leader. The crowd went wild.

In the past decade, American Professional Wrestling has moved from the fringes of mainstream entertainment to its centre, from a cult favourite to a contemporary cultural phenomenon, attracting in the peak period of 1999-2001 up to fifty million viewers worldwide on a weekly basis (Atkinson, 2002). The immense success of professional wrestling has facilitated an expansion unlike any other, in legitimate sports or in “sports entertainment” (a term that pro-wrestling owner and kingpin of World Wrestling Entertainment Vince McMahon cleverly conceived). The WWE, the dominant American professional wrestling franchise, now has its own successful record label, with multiple releases achieving platinum status (over one million copies sold), and its own publishing company, regularly publishing best-selling books and two extremely popular monthly
magazines. Today’s fans of professional wrestling have indeed become fanatic in their dedication to the modern day spectacle.

How has such a seemingly ridiculous spectacle managed to receive such a vast amount of attention? What is it about today’s incarnation of professional wrestling, over those of previous eras, that has led to such levels of patronage?

There are a number of reasons that one can point to in understanding the appeal of professional wrestling. It is like a boxing match, action film, carnival, day-time talk-show, pornography and reality television show all rolled up into one giant explosive ball of excess (much like this sentence). But at its core, it is the interplay between the drama and perceived reality that ultimately keeps fans coming back. At the centre of this melodrama are the wrestling characters, the faces (the “good guys”) and the heels (the “bad guys”). These characters are the bread and butter of the wrestling industry, and are therefore carefully created to suit the needs of, and ultimately profit from, the predominantly North American audiences.

In the late twentieth century and into the new millennium, there was a distinct shift in characteristics of the constructed hero in professional wrestling. He was no longer the blonde-haired, blue-eyed “Golden Boy” hero that was the prevailing form in the previous wrestling era. Rather, he went from wholesome to damaged, from black and white to grey, and above all from conformist to rebel.
In the following pages, it will be shown that this period reflects a fundamental shift in the sensibilities of the wrestling fan, and has helped take “sports entertainment” to a whole new level of success. It is suggested that the transgressive and identity-based dimensions of professional wrestling as they appeal to large mainstream audiences are central to its success. While the wrestling hero has always been a key source of transgression for the wrestling fan, it is my aim to use the most recent incarnation of the wrestling hero, the no-frills anti-hero hero to help illustrate the broader context of identity as an emerging basis for appeal to wrestling fans. By scratching the surface of this underbelly of American and Canadian popular culture, I hope to expose enough of the carrot to entice other researchers into further investigation of this otherwise extremely understudied cultural phenomenon.

**Professional Wrestling in the United States: from Circus Side-Show to “Sports Entertainment”:**

The spectacle of professional wrestling has been around since the mid to late nineteenth century. As one might guess, however, it was a far cry from what is seen on any given night on North American television today. Like the circus, professional wrestling was nothing more than a glorified freak show, featuring midgets, giants, and members of racial or ethnic minorities (Ball, 1990). Michael Ball, in *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* quotes wrestling promoter Jake Pfeffer in an interview taken from 1937:

Freaks I love and they’re my specialty. I am very proud of some of my monstrosities. You can’t get a dollar with a normal-looking guy, no matter how good he can wrestle. Those birds with shaved, egg-shaped heads, handlebar moustaches, tattooed bodies, big stomachs-they’re for
me. Dopes who wear Turkish fezzes and carry prayer rugs into the ring with them, kurdled Kurds, bouncing Czechs—all those foreign novelties I import for my stable (Miley, 1938:59 in Ball, 1990:45).

While promoters showcased their matches in arenas, wrestlers were still often part of the carnival circuits. By the late 1940's, however, this began to change and wrestling took shape as a distinct form and spectacle, with a fan base to support it. With the advent of television, professional wrestling moved away from the fringes of American popular culture and entered into the mainstream. This was the beginning of the "Golden Age" of professional wrestling, where television became the first medium that could adequately show the full action of wrestling's new form to a greater number of viewers (Ball, 1990:53).

While professional wrestling was enjoying a relative peak in terms of its recognition as a distinct form, it remained fragmented. Wrestlers performed regionally and remained in a given territory, with promoters abiding by an unwritten rule to not step on each other's toes and lure wrestlers away from one another (Leland, 2000). In 1982, an aggressive young entrepreneur by the name of Vince McMahon Jr. entered the picture and was to change the face of professional wrestling for years to come. McMahon, unlike his predecessors (namely his father, whose company he inherited) promptly broke the unwritten rule and started pulling talent from wrestling organizations from various parts of the country. One promoter, Vern Gagne, who ran the American Wrestling Alliance (AWA) out of Minneapolis, had the following to say about Vince McMahon:
“I have no love for Vince McMahon... He took 37 of my people, including my announcer Mean Jean Okerlund.” says Gagne. “Then he came into my territory and used them against me.” (Leland, 2000:49).

McMahon himself acknowledges his entrepreneurial methods of the time as slightly underhanded:

“My dad would never have sold me the business if he knew what I was going to do with it (break the turf rules). He would get these phone calls every day from these cronies in the wrestling world that would say that I was invading (their territory). “My God you’re going to end up at the bottom of a river”, he said”. (Vince McMahon, in Mortensen, 1999)

Though deceitful and dishonourable, this tactic nevertheless elevated his company, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF, now called World Wrestling Entertainment, WWE) to the national level. It is here where ‘professional’ wrestling really began to expand and flourish.

By 1989, professional wrestling was undergoing one of its periodic peaks in visibility and popularity, largely as a result of the way in which McMahon had transformed the WWF’s television presence, taking advantage of new technologies and techniques both in camerawork and in presentation (Mazer, 1998). He swept the wrestling world by recognizing television as the future of professional wrestling and mastering the medium, effectively gaining a monopoly on wrestling’s visibility. Fans were now able to watch the pro-wrestling shows on their local stations rather than attending the matches put on in arenas by the regional promoters (Albano, 1999).
The advent of pay-per-view was one such technology that presented an opportunity for McMahon whose far-reaching successes not even he could have foreseen. Prior to this media advancement, wrestling promoters were still trying to pass off their product as legitimate wrestling. This posed a problem for McMahon because while marketed as a legitimate sport, wrestling was subject to pay a tax to the state athletic commissions. It was at this point that McMahon then repositioned his product as “sports-entertainment”, revealing to authorities that professional wrestling was indeed scripted with fixed outcomes (Leland, 2000).

“A funny thing happened: wrestling began to seem less alien to mainstream audiences and advertisers, crossing into music videos and network TV. It grew more popular than ever” (Leland, 2000:51).

In an effort to avoid paying tax, McMahon managed to tap into a whole new way to market his product. He was able to shift his energies from concealing the WWF’s illegitimacy to focusing on athleticism and story-lines. In doing so, it effectively gave the franchise creative license to pursue the absurd more than ever and at times see just how subversive a product they could put both on and off the mat.

**Heroes and Villains:**

“Story-lines and wrestling characters are everything, without those two elements you have nothing. The crowd is your boss. If the boss at the end of a show goes home mad or happy you have done your job. You want the crowd to come back for the next show. If their hero gets the s--t kicked out of him that enrages the crowd and they will come back b/c they want to see what happens at the next show”.

- Pro-wrestling Script-writer
Without exception, the conditions of the spectacle in professional wrestling have always been rooted in the struggle between good and evil. Just as professional sports polarize its consumers with geography, with the “home” team as the “good guy” and the “foreign” team as the “bad guy”, so does professional wrestling, using particular human traits as the basis for who (or what) is good and evil. The theme of “good guy” versus “bad guy” is not a new phenomenon in professional wrestling, and has been the central theme since the beginning.

In *Professional Wrestling as Moral Order* (1974), Thomas Hendricks puts forth that wrestling is nothing more than an exaggerated morality play, with individuals possessing narrowly defined qualities that represent good or evil, using the “wrestling” spectacle as its medium. “Just as a morality play dramatizes conflict between abstract virtues and vices, the basic conflict of professional wrestling is between good and evil, depending upon the current generation and what they see as being good and evil” (Morton and O’Brien, 1985:106).

Similarly, Barthes contends that wrestling represents the good in its mythological fight against evil, with a clear boundary between the two, and with each wrestler representing one side or the other. Invariably, the “good guy” in professional wrestling, or the “face”, and the “bad guy”, the “heel”, employ a very particular set of characteristics. The face represents the normative understanding of the moral individual of the time and the heel is everything that opposes him. The nature of good and evil is strictly defined by the
attitudes and sensibilities of the audience and will change in accordance with these attitudes and sensibilities.

As Barthes puts it, “what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice” (Barthes, 1972: 21). One attends a wrestling match to root for one’s hero, to witness the personified moral image of the constructed “good guy” uphold justice as it is defined by the crowd and the current moral code. “Above all, professional wrestling is nothing more than a spectacle of justice at work, of how evil committed is punished and avenged (Webley, 1998: 60). The face is the upholder of justice and the heel is its threat.

Hero Construction in the “Golden Age” of Pro-Wrestling:

“Sometimes professional wrestling is like chess, and sometimes like ballet, and sometimes like a crude morality play: the good guy who plays according to the rules, versus the bad guy who “bends” them, mocks them and sometimes flouts them altogether”.

“Bad guys subvert the rules, good guys stay clean”.

- Angela Carter (1972)

Hero’s and villains in the Golden Age of Professional wrestling, extending right into the 1990’s, were invariably polar opposites in their moral constructions. Henricks neatly lists some of the prevailing characteristics from this period of wrestling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hero</th>
<th>Villain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite</td>
<td>Rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
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<td>Observes Rules</td>
<td>Breaks Rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handsome</td>
<td>Ugly or Effeminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>Boastful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Dishonest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian</td>
<td>Misanthropic, Brutal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaks Clean</td>
<td>Won’t Release Hold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merciful</td>
<td>Merciless</td>
</tr>
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</table>

While wrestlers in the respective categories did not necessarily possess all of the characteristics listed, it was rare if not unheard of that a heel would possess any of the face qualities and visa versa.

A classic villain was the bleach-blonde wrestler who was typically defined by his vanity and self-absorption. Morton and O’Brien cite “the prissy, marcelled villainous ring persona of Gorgeous George” as a prime example of the “star people loved to hate” (Morton and O’Brien, 1985: 131). Perhaps more than any other wrestler, he was the most befitted embodiment of the vain villain, and is consequently considered one of the most successful villains ever constructed in professional wrestling. It is Gorgeous George whose performances worked the archetype of the “narcissistic brawler, proud of his own beauty and talents while condescending toward his foes” (Mazer, 1998: 94).

Ricky Starr, who was one of the more popular effeminate villains, entered the ring to an introduction of “from Greenwich Village, weighing in at…” Mazer, 1998: 94). While his weight was irrelevant, the use of this area of New York City was very relevant, as Greenwich Village is widely known to be a “queer space”. He would literally prance and dance into the ring and subsequently invoke a reaction from the crowd. “Its presentation
of the 'not-so-manly' man vividly marked the conventional cliches of homosexual performances: he dances and teases, even offers himself to other men" (Mazer, 1998: 95).

Throughout this period, wrestling promoters did (and still do) not hold back in their use of sexually, racially and politically motivated stereotypes to define the villain. Most often, the heel was constructed around prevailing political sentiments in the United States, and he typically represented a threat to justice and freedom as defined by the American public. The hero, on the other hand, was his "Golden Boy" American counterpart. Wrestling analysts tend to agree that the poster-child for this hero was Hulk Hogan.

"Hulk Hogan is maybe the classic good guy, the classic hero. There isn’t too much about him you can hate. Hulk seems to appeal directly to children. His ideals are easy to grasp, simple, straightforward. Eat right, get good exercise, don’t do drugs. Frankly, I think he makes a good role model for children”.

- Ball (in Mortensen, 1999)

The most distinctive villain tended(s) to be the evil foreigner, which is historically representative of American distrust of foreigners (Morton and O’Brien, 1985). Following World War II, as a distinct anti-German sentiment prevailed, the thinly veiled persona of the swastika-laden German heel almost always bore a stereotypically Third-Reich sounding name, like Karl von Hess; Fritz von Erich; Otto von Krupp, etc. (Albano, 1999). Similarly, the Cold War sparked a series of evil anti-capitalist Russian brutes (eg. "Nikolai Volkoff’); and more recently, following the Gulf War a dark-skinned faction of terrorist-like Middle-Easterners emerged ("The Nation of Domination") to threaten the
integrity of the American people. The overall formula for promoters was simple: construct a wrestler that would express some anti-American sentiments, dress the part, throw in some foul play and you have a villain.

During the late 1970’s, when America was at war with Iran,

“Along came in wrestling “The Iron Sheik” from Iran. An Iranian wrestler, waving the flag in the middle of the ring with the Ayatollah’s picture on it, shouting to the world how great the Ayatollah was. You couldn’t come up with a better scenario of a bad guy.” The crowd could not wait to see somebody kill this guy. The guy that came along to beat the Sheik was the perfect foil. It was GI Joe personified. Here was the American drill Sargent with the big chin and the helmet and a camouflage uniform. It was fantastic.

- Jerry “The King” Lawler, ex-wrestler and current WWE commentator (in Mortensen, 1999).

Regardless of the prevailing moral code that shaped the villain, it was always clear as to who the villain was and who was the hero. During this period, while the hero was typically the friendly (unless otherwise provoked), honest and good citizen, one thing was certain, he never broke the rules. The expectation of the hero was that he was an upright citizen whose moral duty was to maintain order. The villain was the threat to this order.

During the Golden Age of pro-wrestling, the threats were clear. In times of a tense political environment, the “evil foreigner” portrayal directly reflected the xenophobia of the American public. Similarly, the construction of the effeminate villain reveals the strong homophobic sentiments of the time. As Mazer puts it, “he (the effeminate heel)
appears to have violated all the protocols of masculine, heterosexual propriety” (Mazer, 1998: 95). Not only was he apparently attracted to men, but he flaunted it.

As for the arrogant “pretty boy” construction, however, the interpretation is slightly more complex. In terms of physical appearance, the vain character was not entirely unlike the conventional hero. His behaviour, however, was his defining feature, as he blatantly disregarded the rules of the “sport” and epitomized self-absorption. In contrast, the hero of the time, while coming across as “handsome”, never explicitly expressed any awareness of his physical attractiveness. As suggested by Henricks’ list, he was expected to be humble and play by the rules. In this period of professional wrestling, any deviation from that would have rendered him a villain. In recent years, however, the face and the heel have taken on a new form.

**The (Re)-Construction of the Hero... The “Rock” and the “Stone Cold” Phenomenon:**

“My friends told me, ‘Steve, you’re a baby face now.’ I’d say bulls--t. I’m a heel. I’ve always been a heel. They might be cheering me, but I’m not a baby face. Then I realized they were right. If it was fifteen years ago, doing the stuff I do, people would hate my guts...”.

“You sit there and you thump your bible and say your prayers, and it didn’t get you anywhere. You talk about your psalms, you talk about John 3:16. Well, Austin 3:16 says I just whipped your ass”.

- “Stone Cold” Steve Austin

Austin 3:16

- Logo for the best selling T-shirt that the WWF ever produced.
Barthes defines the heel in professional wrestling as "essentially someone unstable, who accepts the rules only when they are useful to him and transgresses the formal continuity of attitudes. He is unpredictable, therefore asocial" (Barthes, 1972:24). While this holds true in wrestling's Golden Age where these traits were once synonymous with the heel, it is now the hero who rejects the formal boundaries of professional wrestling. This shift in hero construction in pro-wrestling can be traced to the early 1990's.

From the moment that he inherited the World Wrestling Federation until the early 1990's, Vince McMahon Jr. had a virtual monopoly on professional wrestling at the national level. At that stage, however, billionaire American entrepreneur Ted Turner entered the picture by purchasing a small professional wrestling organization called The National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and transformed it into a national firm which he called World Championship Wrestling (WCW) (Hofstede, 1999:13). McMahon recalls, "I remember getting a phone call from Ted (Turner) and he said "Vince, I'm in the rasslin' business." I thought to myself, here we go." (McMahon, in Mortensen, 1999).

While on the surface this added competition appeared to threaten McMahon's establishment, in the end it proved to be the best thing that could have happened to him and his company. "The competition forced both organizations to be more creative in their story-lines, to work harder at creating new characters and at presenting their top stars from fresh angles" (Hofstede, 1999:13).
The WCW then did the unthinkable in professional wrestling, converting the all-time "Golden Boy" of professional wrestling, Hulk Hogan, into a heel for the first time in Hogan’s lengthy wrestling career, and re-named him “Hollywood” Hulk Hogan. He wore black sunglasses with a matching bandana and tights and became the ring leader for a rebel faction within the WCW called the NWO (New World Order), and the fans loved it. At the time, Hulk Hogan himself had the following commentary on his new character:

“Now I'm the worst bad guy around. I can't win a match unless I cheat... and people love me.”

- “Hollywood” Hulk Hogan (Mortensen, 1999).

The wrestling script-writer that was interviewed for this paper had the following to say about this period:

“In a reverse role Hogan became a heel with the NWO in the WCW. At first it was not taken lightly by the crowd. How can Hogan be so good for all these years, and now is evil? The wrestling fans were in shock. But in less than a month Hogan was a hero even if he was a bad guy. Once again he could do no wrong”.

As the popularity of the rebel faction grew in the WCW, McMahon clearly had to create a comparable villain in the WWF. This is when he introduced the character called “Stone Cold Steve Austin”.

The original plan for the character was to be a disrespectful, middle-finger raising fowl-mouthed heel that the audience would love to hate. To the surprise of the WWF writers, the crowd adored him. But there was something different about the way the crowd loved “Hollywood” Hogan than the way they adored Austin. In Hogan’s case, the crowd loved
to hate him, and this made him extremely popular, and therefore successful. In Austin’s case, however, the crowd did not love to hate him, they just plain loved him.

David Hofstede gives the following description of Steve Austin:

“Rolling Stone magazine called him the new American hero, but his character is not the kind that usually makes for a classic face. He dresses in basic black, he swears constantly, he breaks the rules like a heel, and his favourite gesture is the raised middle finger, which he directs both at opponents and officials... If he is indeed the American hero, Austin’s success says as much about America as it does about wrestling”. (Hofstede, 1999:16).

This was by no means Austin’s first persona. As with many wrestlers, Austin went through a series of characters until he found one that the audience resonated with (previously he was “Stunning Steve Austin”, a narcissistic “pretty-boy” wrestler that the wrestling public did not take to). The original intention for the character, however, was to be a heel, and the WWF continued to market him as such. “Stone Cold”, however, went on to become arguably one of the most popular wrestling characters ever created.

“Austin became the great anti-hero. We tried everything that we could do to make him the top bad guy, but every week we just heard more and more cheering. The dirtier he got, the more he got cheered. The consumer made the decision for us, and they made the right decision, as they always do really.”

- Jim Ross, WWE Executive
(in Mortensen, 1999).

Recognizing this newfound formula for success, McMahon continued to change the face of professional wrestling. Following a legitimate knee injury to Steve Austin, McMahon introduced a character that came to be known as “The Rock” who went on to become
Austin's successor as the WWF's most prized asset. The success of the Rock, widely considered to be on par with Stone Cold and Hulk Hogan as the most successful wrestling personalities in recent history, perhaps illustrates the shift in hero construction in American pro-wrestling even better than does the success of Stone Cold.

Initially the dark-skinned Rock (then called "Rocky Maivia") was one relatively insignificant member of a renegade "heel" group of "Middle-Eastern-like" thugs (with ascribed anti-Arab connotations) called the "Nation of Domination". Having little success with this character, McMahon tried to convert the character into a cocky, arrogant pretty boy and re-named him "The Rock". As with the creation of Stone Cold, it was fully expected that audiences would love to hate The Rock. Again, as with Stone Cold, much to the surprise of the creators, North American audiences loved him. Although described as arrogant, feisty, profane and unapologetic, he became known as the "The People's Champion", and with his signature move "The People's Elbow", the people did indeed champion the Rock.

The success of the Rock breaks two previously existing conventions in American professional wrestling, and in doing so further illustrates the shift in hero construction. First, although he was dark-skinned and previously cast as a member of an ethnic minority "heel" group, the character of "The Rock" was in no way linked to his physical darkness. Where once the ethnic background of "The Rock" was his defining characteristic, it became irrelevant to the persona. He became ethnically ambiguous,
arrogant, condescending, and one of the most popular heroic personalities in the history of professional wrestling.

Where being cast as an arrogant, narcissistic pretty boy was historically synonymous with being a heel, it was central to The Rock’s success. Audiences could not get enough of his self-serving, “take no s—t” attitude and actually revered his arrogance and narcissism. Moreover, The Rock was single-handedly credited for nearly doubling the World Wrestling Federation’s female fan quotient. Women loved him and men wanted to be him. He managed to capture audiences, both men and women, with a perfect combination of no-frills attitude, dashing good looks and a level of charisma that has arguably not been seen since in professional wrestling.

One wrestling analyst had the following to say about the two giant franchises of professional wrestling of the mid-late 1990’s, the WWF and WCW: “WCW attempts to present an image similar to that of wrestling during the sport’s Golden Age. Overall, the promotion is closer to the wrestling of the 1950’s than the WWF is” (Archer, 1999:24).

While the “promotion” that Archer refers to reflects an overall image put forth by the organization, it was rooted in their construction of the hero. The WCW maintained the “Golden Boy” image of the hero and essentially fell behind in the ever-changing world of professional wrestling. “The WWF, led by Vince McMahon Jr., sensed that the audience for wrestling had changed, radically, and he had the wit to change with it” (Albano,
A fan that was interviewed for this piece said the following about the WCW/WWF battle in the late nineties:

“That’s what made wrestling live. The whole WCW vs. WWF thing, ‘til 1998, when wrestling was changing, and what the WWF did was start using the whole “forget authority, I’m in your face, I’m here, I’m now, I’m doing what I wanna’ do when I wanna’ do it”.

Following a heated rivalry between the two major wrestling players, the success of the WWF and its new personality proved to be too much for Ted Turner and the WCW. In early 2001, after a series of failed attempts to win over the competing fan base, the WCW went bankrupt. Rather than bask in his victory in the battle for wrestling prowess, McMahon acquired his competitor and its wrestling talent, restoring the monopoly that he once had on professional wrestling.

“The most important thing to come out of the Monday Night war (WCW-WWF battle) was ‘don’t mess with Vince McMahon.’”

- Gerald Brisco, WWE Official
  (in Mortensen, 1999)

McMahon acknowledges the impact that “Stone Cold” had on the survival and eventual success of the WWF/WWE.

“No one thing stands out as THE chief reason why we became successful, other than Stone Cold maybe. I always think there’s a multitude of a lot of little things coming together.”

- Vince McMahon
  (in Mortensen, 1999).
At some point, Vince McMahon, in his relentless pursuit for the construction of a hero for the wrestling fan masses, stumbled across an image that wrestling fans resonated with like no other, that of “Stone Cold Steve Austin”. This proved to be the launchpad to McMahon’s marketing success. The invention and subsequent proliferation of the character has effectively re-defined the hero in professional wrestling. Where once the hero was the polite, friendly, law-abiding humanitarian, he has recently been constructed to be a self-serving, rule breaking, abrasive menace to society. Historically all of these qualities only existed in the villains of professional wrestling. This is no longer the case.

Just as the hero has changed, so has the villain. “They (no longer) just play the parts of princes-in-training and ersatz giants but are street smart working men and greedy capitalists—all images drawn from the day to day world of the audience” (Twitchell, 1992:226). While Austin is the quintessential “working man”, McMahon went as far as to cast himself as the greedy capitalist, pulling the strings of the “working man’s hero”, appointing himself as the villain. Since then, a prevailing theme of the corporate oppressor has remained in the WWE. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a fan about current heroes and villains for the WWE:

Me: Currently, (Dave) Batista is a fan favourite. What is it about him that people find appealing?

Fan: He doesn’t take any crap. Now, that is. Before he used to be just a pawn, but he’s starting to break out and do what he wants to do when he wants to do it... not what anyone wants of him... The good guys are honourable, but they don’t listen to authority, cause the authority is usually the bad guy”... “It’s better to have a bad guy in power (GM, Commissioner, Owner) ‘cause no-one likes a good guy in power. It’s just better for business. Vince said that.
It is suggested that the Golden Age of professional wrestling only really came to an end in the early to mid-1990's. Since then, the concept of the hero in professional wrestling was effectively re-created. While it was the hero's moral obligation in the Golden Age of wrestling to uphold justice by maintaining order, it has since become the agenda of the hero to serve *his* interests by challenging the moral order. Just as the working man has become the hero, his corporate oppressors and the rules and manipulative capabilities that come with them, have become his foe. This period reflects a fundamental shift in sensibilities of the wrestling fan, and has helped take the appeal of "sports entertainment" to mainstream audiences.

**Research Methods:**

The study utilized information gathered from a series of interviews, taken both from professional wrestling documentaries and from interviews conducted on my own. I interviewed two local professional wrestlers, three informed fans, a wrestling promoter and a professional wrestling script-writer over a period of approximately three months. The interviews with the wrestlers, wrestling fans and the wrestling promoter were all conducted in person at a neutral location. The interview with the script-writer was done via an anonymous email interview that was negotiated by the wrestling promoter, as it is his script-writer.

The promoter and script-writer were not particularly co-operative for the study. The script-writer required complete anonymity, to protect both the writer and his regard for the integrity of the industry. I find this rather ironic, as the two individuals wished to
conceal the scripter's identity in an effort to seek a certain level of credibility. In an industry that clearly presents a staged product, the two individuals claimed to wish to protect their integrity (by remaining anonymous) and the integrity of the industry by resisting removal of the very thin veil of legitimacy. This proved to be an obstacle for the interview process.

Moreover it was difficult, initially, to even get the anonymous interview. I was forced to chase after the promoter to finally submit the questions to his scripter for over two-months, as both individuals claimed to be very busy. The wrestling promoter told me that he ran a used car lot in addition to wrestling and promoting, and the script-writer was apparently involved in the local film industry and worked long hours. Due to time constraints, this made it virtually impossible to conduct follow-up interviews with the script-writer, which I feel was essential to enrich the interview results.

While I trust the credibility of the source and his script-writer, it can be said that the interview is perhaps not as fruitful nor as reliable as it needed to be. In addition, as this was my first set of interviews for any study, the actual interview results are not as revealing as they perhaps could or should have been. During informal conversations with some wrestlers and many wrestling fans (a sort of pre-screening), I found that many of their answers were not as thoughtful as I had hoped or required. This led me to focus on the script-writer and promoter as primary sources, which proved to be insufficient in clearly reinforcing some of my contentions. For these reasons, any further study on this
Transgression:

"Pro-wrestling is different (than other forms of drama). The characters, and the people performing them will become inter-linked. They're one and the same. If you go to a movie premiere and get to shake hands with Tom Cruise, you're shaking hands with Tom Cruise, not Jerry McGuire. If you're shaking hands with Ric Flair (wrestler), you're shaking hands with the Ric Flair who's going to be in the ring and the Ric Flair whose paraphernalia you're going to buy. The actor and character are the same. I think that makes the element of believability, the engaged, what we call in drama "the suspension of disbelief" more powerful than it is when we're talking about other fans (of other dramatic forms)."

- Gerald Morton (in Mortensen, 1999)

"When Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke of "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith," he described a means by which human imagination, confronted by mimetic art, overcomes its literalistic inclination and, for the sake of the experience, accepts momentarily as real that which is known to be unrealistic". (Craven and Mosely, 1972:327).

Much of the academic discourse, although limited and largely outdated, labels pro-wrestling as a violent folk drama with theatrical roots. Comparisons are thus often made between wrestling and other forms of theatre. Angela Carter aptly discusses pro-wrestling as it relates to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, possessing distinct “elements of antique theatre, masks, hieratic posturing, menace, dread, violence, pain—all the apparatus of the Theatre of Cruelty except its metaphysics” (Carter, 1976:227). Carter would be pleased to learn that metaphysics has since entered as a recurring theme in the WWE.
The key point of comparison between the appeal of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and professional wrestling is the transgressive nature of each. Perhaps Eco puts it best:

Nor can we be satisfied with the reflection that in the violation of the rule on the part of a character so different from us we not only feel the security of our own impunity but also enjoy the savor of transgression by an intermediary. Since he is paying for us, we can allow ourselves the vicarious pleasure of a transgression that offends a rule we have secretly wanted to violate, but without risk (Eco, 1986:270).

In a world where the concept of risk-taking is becoming increasingly glorified, the actual act of risk-taking is arguably much less prevalent. In the highly controlled, risk-less environment staged by wrestling promoters, the illusion of risk and the ideal of risk-taking sparks interest for the fan.

In Escape Attempts, Cohen and Taylor unpack what they call “our individual and collective forms of resistance” (Cohen and Taylor, 1978:22). Deborah Lupton neatly sums up this particular aspect of their contention:

Cohen and Taylor discuss a number of ways in which individuals seek to transcend the banal, routine natures of everyday life, to “escape and resist reality”. They argue that ‘escape attempts’ all involve some risks, from the minor risk of offending one’s partner or friends, to major threatening of life and limb (Lupton, 1999:150).

What they put forth is that individuals get set in a routine and find it difficult, if not frightening, to remove themselves from it. In doing so, they suggest that routines are inherently oppressive, and therefore individuals resort to other activities in order to “break out of their routine”. In effect, the routine restricts the individual, rendering him/her in need of an outlet.
Lupton illustrates and extends Cohen and Taylor’s account by making reference to the eighteenth century carnival. As a means to break from their oppressive routines, individuals attended the carnival in an effort to “see the unseeable and do the undoable”. She states that “aggressive and violent acts were depicted symbolically in rituals, but real acts of violence also took place, such as fighting among revelers, the torturing or killing of domestic animals or the stoning of Jews, and carnival was accepted as the time when one could insult one’s fellows freely. Inversions and transgressions were pivotal activities of carnival” (Lupton, 1999:166). Relatedly, I can recall fights breaking out all over the arena between fans when I last attended a pro-wrestling event in the late nineties.

In the age of the “Risk Society”, transgression can be framed in the context of vicarious risk. The eighteenth century carnival was essentially an escape from the confines of the daily routines of carnival-goers. The events that took place at the carnival were unlike anything that transpired in their daily lives. The inversion of morality acted as a form of transgression, “allowing temporary liberation from routine constraints, controls and the established order” (Lupton, 1999:156). By observing the spectacle and breaking from their daily routine, wrestling fans are able to escape the oppression of that routine. The ritualization and celebration of rebellious acts that Lupton refers to in her analysis of the carnival are now seen in the exploitation of sex and violence in the form of professional wrestling.

“When we re-educated the public that you’re gonna see a three-hour show, not a Mike Tyson fight that’s going to end in fifteen seconds, these guys are going to give you 110% and let you escape reality for a while and let
you be whoever you want to be for a while and live vicariously through us, the business sky-rocketed.

- "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan
  (in Mortensen, 1999).

Mazer suggests that "more than a vulgar parody of a 'real' sport, then, professional wrestling is also a sophisticated theatrical representation of the transgressive, violent urges generally repressed in everyday life". She goes on to say that "more than a staged fight between representatives of good and evil, at its heart is a Rabelaisian carnival, an invitation to every participant to share in expressions of excess and to celebrate the desire for, if not the action of, transgression against whatever cultural values are perceived as dominant and/or oppressive in everyday life" (Mazer, 1998:19).

In recent years, the rapid increase in popularity of sports fanaticism (particularly in the North American context) has led to the emergence of a new sociology of sport discourse surrounding professional wrestling, that of the increasing appeal of its sport-like violence in addition to its dramatic appeal. This approach neatly builds on the aforementioned lines. Prior to the pioneering work of Michael Atkinson, few have linked the sociology of sport and theatrical performance with respect to the appeal of professional wrestling at any length.

Drawing from works by Elias, Dunning, Maguire and other sports sociologists, Atkinson contends that professional wrestling draws the bulk of its appeal "from its ability to create "exciting significance" for spectators through a "mock battle"/"mock sport" formula of
staged competition” (Atkinson, 2002:48). He uses the concept of “mimesis” to illustrate this theme.

Sports contests provide an interactive scenario that facilitates a “controlled de-controlling” of emotional controls among participants and spectators (cf. Elias and Dunning, 1986)... One of sport’s primary roles within complex configurations is, then, to de-routinize social life (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Sport becomes a social theatre within which spectators are aroused by the tension-balances created through athletic contests (Dunning, 1999; Elias and Dunning, 1986). In this theatre, sport is referred to as mimetic because it resembles war-like competition-socially and emotionally significant to individuals because it elicits a level of excitement perhaps unparalleled in other figurational settings. (Atkinson, 2002:49).

He quotes Maguire’s analysis on “mimesis” at length to help illustrate this theme:

Mimetic activities vary considerably across the globe, both in terms of their intensity and style, but they have basic structural characteristics in common. That is, they provide a “make-believe” setting which allows emotions to flow more easily, and which elicits excitement of some kind in imitating that produced by “real life situation,” yet without their dangers or risks. “Mimetic” activities, locally constructed or globally generated, thus allow, within certain limits, for socially permitted self-centeredness. Excitement is elicited by the creation of tensions: this can involve the imaginary or controlled “real” danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness, and/or joy. (Atkinson, 2002:49 on Maguire, 1999:71).

Professional wrestling can therefore be seen as a unique hybrid of both sporting and theatrical entertainment. However, while it possesses distinct elements of each, it ultimately does not conform to the rules of either sports or theatre. It is therefore a fragile hybrid that can only survive by never remaining static. It depends on the need to exploit something beyond sheer athleticism and sheer theatrics, something that captures more than just the entertainment angle and the athletic angle. It is suggested here that identity is the glue that binds the athletics and theatrics to the hearts and minds of wrestling fans.
Identity:

“I talk a lot of trash. I think people like that because it’s the nineties now, and I was originally a bad guy and people started liking me so I just go that way. I don’t really cater to the fans and I think that’s why they like me. When you can be yourself and not be something else that’s when you’re successful.”

- “Stone Cold” Steve Austin (in Mortensen, 1999).

“Anytime you got The Rock or Steve Austin or Mick Foley, the people want to see them because that’s who they are... that’s the way that most major talent gets over, by being themselves with the volume turned way up.”

- Jim Cornette, WWE talent scout (in Mortensen, 1999)

“People like being involved.”

- Hulk Hogan (in Mortensen, 1999).

The purely physical and emotional spectacular nature of professional wrestling has expanded, rapidly occupying the cognitive dimension as well, as it appears that wrestling fans now identify with particular characterological features of favoured combatants. Mazer suggests that “with its roots in the ancients and medieval worlds, with its hyper-sized displays of character and action, with its play at the edge of violence, professional wrestling reaches past the conscious responses of the spectators into the reflexive and visceral” (Mazer, 1998:17). While this may hold true, it is suggested here that professional wrestling rides the line between the conscious and unconscious responses of the spectators. Wrestling fans are as emotional as ever, but seem to be a bit more
thoughtful about the characters and their characteristics, actually considering which characters/characteristics they like and why. This in turn makes for a more complex appeal of the wrestling characters and their story-lines, as fans appear to be more actively engaged with particular characters than they perhaps once were.

As the concept of identity is investigated as the emerging foundation upon which wrestling characters and characteristics are created, it is first necessary to define identification of audiences with media characters in general terms, and then place specific examples and interview excerpts within this framework. Media scholar Jonathan Cohen establishes a comprehensive definition of audience identification with media characters, from which I will draw upon to help illustrate the appeal of identity as it relates to modern American professional wrestling.

"Unlike a purely psychological theory of identification or a conception linked to sociological notions of identifying with social groups or leaders, identification is defined here as a response to textual features that are intended to provoke identification. Directors and writers create characters with whom audiences are meant to interact to enjoy books, films, or television programs. Unlike identification with parents, leaders, or nations, identification with media characters is a result of a carefully constructed situation. Thus, media studies of identification must account for the production of identification targets as well as the identification of audiences with them" (Cohen, 2001:251).

While it can be argued that professional wrestling has always used identity to appeal to audiences, since breaking from the shackles of legitimacy, wrestling promoters have been able to appeal more deeply to its consumers. Wrestling fans know that the situation is contrived, and therefore they allow themselves to be absorbed into it. During the Golden Age of professional wrestling, wrestling fans could only get as involved with the action
as they could with a boxing match, through its athletics, but when boxers really hate each other the match is that much more appealing. The drama builds upon the athletics. The theatrical component of pro-wrestling thus allows the audience to become even more involved by identifying with the wants and needs of specific characters.

Building on the transgressive nature of pro-wrestling’s appeal previously outlined, a useful starting point in understanding identity and pro-wrestling is linking it to the escapist notion of vicarious risk.

“It is perhaps this function of identification—the chance for vicarious experience—that has attracted most attention by media scholars. Vicarious experience may take various forms: experiencing things we cannot, or have not yet had the chance to, experience in person (e.g., winning a million dollars on Who Wants to be a Millionaire? (Gentile, 2000); trying on alternative identities (e.g., being an Olympic athlete, gangster, brilliant scientist, or super model for a day); or otherwise adopting the goals, feelings, or thoughts imagined to be those of the target of our identification. Whether this vicarious experience results in overt behaviour (dressing up like Madonna or practicing a Michael Jordan jump shot), or takes on a more purely imaginative form, it is this vicarious experience that makes identification central. Through identification with characters in books, films, and television, we extend our emotional horizons and social perspectives” (Cohen, 2001:49).

Identification acts as a form of fulfillment, satisfying those urges or needs that for one reason or another cannot otherwise be satisfied. As a result, one may extend one’s limited horizons by assuming the identity of a constructed character or hero, effectively living vicariously through that character.

Identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other—that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification. For Wollheim, the target of identification was not limited to parents but may be any other person or character we can imagine. For Bettelheim
(1943), identification does not require actively or willfully taking on the identity of the other but, rather, sharing their perspective and internalizing their view of the world... He argued that by identifying with the hero of a tale, children psychologically experience the triumph of good over evil and learn that being good pays. In sum, according to Freud (1940/1989), Wollheim (1974), and Bettelheim (1943, 1976), identification is an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's point of view. Identification leads to the (temporary) adoption of an external point of view and to viewing the world through an alternative social reality. The varying intensity of identification reflects the extent to which one exchanges his or her own perspective for that of another and is able to forget him- or herself (Cohen, 2001:247).

One surrenders one's own consciousness, or forgets him/herself, for the brief moment that he/she is engaged with the media character. The void left in that consciousness for that brief period is filled with the identity and experiences of the character.

"When reading a novel or watching a film or a television program, audience members often become absorbed in the plot and identify with the characters portrayed. Unlike the more distanced mode of reception-that of spectatorship-identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them... As Morley (1992) said: "One can hardly imagine any television or text having any effect whatever without that identification"... While identifying with a character, an audience member imagines him-or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text. While strongly identifying, the audience member ceases to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member and temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopts the characters' goals, comprehends plot events in reference to these goals, and experiences the feelings that result from the interaction of these goals and the events that take place... Identification means that the knowledge of the audience members is processed from the character's perspective and is transformed into empathic emotions... The concept best fits reactions toward fictional characters in narrative texts. This is not to say that identification is impossible with other types of characters, such as sports players, but simply that this sort of identification: (a) is less likely and (b) would probably be manifested in different ways" (Cohen, 2001:245).
The audience member, when identifying with a particular character, essentially gets absorbed into the character, feeling that they are that character for the brief moment that they are engaged with them. The more effective the actor is, then, the more likely it is that the audience member will identify with the character that is being portrayed.

If the experiences and perceived identity of the characters resonate with the audience member, then he/she is likely to be more engaged with the media character and identify with it. In recent years, there has been an increasing link between the actors who play the wrestlers and the characters that they play. The local wrestling promoter that was interviewed for this paper offered the following observation on the topic:

In the past few years, the big boys, the WWE and WCW got away from using freaks and make believe characters, like Duke the Dumpster Drosey, the Big Boss Man, Doink the Clown, etc., and to a certain extent even local promotions have gotten away from creating freaky characters. Wrestling’s current state is all about reality, how a wrestler is as a character is how he or she is in real life. Take the Rock, Steve Austin, Dave Batista, all of these characters at one time in their wrestling career had some make believe personalities, but script-writers and promoters soon found out that (revealing) their real names and who they are is better for their wrestling characters, and better for the wrestling promotion. In return, fans still associate themselves with their favorites. When wrestling was about make believe characters like the Ultimate Warrior, Hogan, Uncle Elmer, Adorable Adrian Adonis, anyone who watched wrestling wanted to be the favourite wrestler... Wrestlers are characters who anyone can relate to at its present state.

With the comic book type hero’s from the Golden Age of professional wrestling, audiences wanted “to be their favourite wrestler”. Because current wrestling heroes project an image of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, audiences can feel that they are the wrestling characters. This has in turn allowed the audience members to
resonate even more strongly with the characters, as the actors themselves seem to be increasingly playing out some of their real life characteristics. Subsequently, in this era of reality television, the recent trend of allowing the hero to “play himself” (or at least the perception of this), has therefore become the vehicle through which fans can more deeply identify with characters. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a wrestling fan:

Me: What is/was it about arguably the most successful character(s) in pro-wrestling’s recent history (next to Hulk Hogan, of course), Stone Cold Steve Austin, that made him so popular?

Fan: When Stone Cold came out, what made him big was he came out and said “Cause Stone Cold said so” and that changed the face of wrestling... They tried marketing Stone Cold as a Pretty-Boy, and they finally said “what do you want to do? How do you act? He went out and did the beer-drinking redneck don’t take s--t kinda guy and it sold. Same with the Rock. Currently you’ll see characters that reflect the wrestler in real life and that sells.

Me: So they play themselves, and the fans identify with that?

Fan: Exactly... So now you’re seeing a lot of characters that are like “I act like this”. John Sena (up and coming “WWE Superstar”) is the perfect example, and supposed to be the next Rock, just because people love him. He loves rapping. He wanted to incorporate this into his character before but they wouldn’t let him. But then he gave it a try, and now he’s THE biggest wrestler on Smackdown (WWE’s weekly program). He came out of nowhere, and people love him. And this is him, he raps in his spare time. That’s just what he does.

In illustrating identification with media characters, Cohen breaks down his definition of identification into four components. I will outline each, and then provide commentary and excerpts to support each in the contemporary context of professional wrestling.

“The first is empathy or sharing the feelings of the character (i.e being happy; sad; or scared, not for the character, but with the character)” (Cohen, 2001:256).
Me: When you are watching your favourite wrestler, do you feel that you share in his success and failure in a given match?

Fan: Yes.

Me: To what extent would you say that you are cheering for him and to what extent are you cheering with him?

Fan: When you're watching, you're cheering for him obviously, but depending on what he's going for, what his goals are, how much you care about what he's doing you're cheering with him more I guess, because there's a stage when you're jumping off the couch and really hope he wins because you want him to.

Me: Would you say that you are emotionally linked with him when you're yelling and screaming at the TV set?

Fan: Yes, you're definitely emotionally linked with him. That's how all main events usually are these days, emotional... They have better writers now. It's way more based around story-line... more emotional. Cause everyone has in their daily life where they don't like someone. Well this is like, you know, "well I don't like you", and they'll go at it. They never used to have that before. It used to be, "Okay you're a qualifier for the contendership and we're 'gonna let you two go at it, just like boxing is these days. They've really emphasized story-lines, adding that emotional touch where these two really hate each other and go at it. Fans are way more into it. In a recent example with the whole Batista vs. Triple H thing (the character Triple H was controlling Batista, thereby not allowing him to reach his individual potential). The fact that you're cheering for Batista because you want him to win due to the fact that, you know, he's kind of pushed up and become something way better... that's why, you're with him, like you want him to win... because you're just so into it because you want him to do this certain thing. I don't know how else to explain it.

Me: What's at stake for you emotionally if he loses or if he wins?

Fan: If he wins, you're happy (chuckle).

Me: So are you glad for him or are you glad for you or both?

Fan: In a way, both (you and him). You obviously get happy.

The fan makes an important distinction here between the appeal of pro-wrestling in the past as a sport (similar to boxing) and at present as more character based. He clearly
prefers the latter, as he identifies with the motivations and feelings of the actor, something he cannot so clearly do with the athlete. In a boxing match, he would cheer more for the individual to win the prize, in a wrestling match he is cheering with the individual to transgress.

"The second dimension is a cognitive aspect that is manifest in sharing the perspective of the character. Operationally this can be measured by the degree to which an audience member feels he or she understands the character and the motivations for his or her behaviour" (Cohen, 2001:256).

Me: To what extent do you feel that you understand your favourite characters motivations/goals for what they are doing? For example, when Batista escaped the reign of Triple H.

Fan: You totally understand it. I don’t think anyone cheers for anyone anymore unless they understand what he’s doing it for...

Me: So fans are thinking about it more than in the past?

Fan: Fans are totally thinking about it more than they used to. I think that’s the whole basis for the WWE right now that they’re into more in that fashion.

Me: What is an example of a character whose motivations you understand, and what, would you say, are those motivations?

Fan: We talked about Stone Cold Steve Austin where his motivations were “screw the boss!” and stuff like that because they’re keeping him down. Kind of like the repressive nature of the bad guy, the bad guy always has the power, and his (Stone Cold) goals were to break free against all odds and you get in touch with that and that’s what I love anyway.

Me: So you relate with his motivations, is that what it is?

Fan: Yes, you totally relate with that, like in real life I guess, going against all odds. That’s what I love about wrestling, it’s against all odds. In the main event, the bad guy always has the power and even when the title is in the good guy’s hands it’s always against all odds for the good guy. They’ll make it really tough for him to keep it.
This fan has clearly given some thought as to why he identifies with particular characters and characteristics and feels that he understands the motivations of the wrestlers themselves. The anti-hero hero always seems to have more obstacles than the heel to overcome in order to achieve his/her goals. The fan seems to resonate with this as he perhaps feels that his life is full of adversity and he too must rise above in order to survive.

"The third indicator of identification is motivational, and this addresses the degree to which the audience member internalizes and shares the goals of the character" (Cohen, 2001:256).

Me: To what extent do you feel that you share the goals of your character? Are some of your views on your favourite characteristics/characters based on your personal experience as well?

Fan: Yah, I guess so. The whole against all odds thing that Batista is going for, I think that's why it sells so well, because you can just break free and bust out and I think everybody has that in their real life... or at least mostly everyone, you know, some people not, but people watching wrestling that are loving this character, just like when Stone Cold said "f--k you" to Vince, it's just like, yah I want to do that to my boss too... like who doesn't want to be the top of the world right, and the guy that wins the belt is on top of the world. So you're rooting for the good guy who's being repressed by all these guys.

Not only does the fan seem to understand the motivations of his favourite wrestlers, but he clearly shares those motivations. A common theme in wrestling since the Golden Age is that of the greedy capitalist corporate oppressor whose purpose it seems is to hold down the anti-hero hero. The current character (Dave) "Batista" (which is his actual name) is in a feud with "Triple H", who in reality is married to the daughter of Vince McMahon and is reported to have behind-the-scenes influence. Batista was initially Triple H's sidekick who was abused by Triple H, but he eventually "broke free" from the
oppression. The fan seems to be well aware of the apparent behind-the-scenes politics and shares the goals of Batista.

“Finally, the fourth component of identification is absorption or the degree to which self-awareness is lost during exposure to the text. Because identification is conceived as temporary and fleeting, it should be measured both in terms of intensity and frequency. The more someone is absorbed in the text, empathizes with and understands a character, and adopts his or her goals, the more he or she may be said to identify with that character” (Cohen, 2001:256).

Me: When you are watching wrestling, how involved do you get in the action? To what extent would you say you “lose it”?

Fan: I usually zone everything out. I’ll just be sitting there and watching it and jumping around and getting into and forgetting everything else that I need to do right now and just get involved with the match that I want to see.

Me: How much would you say that your favourite characters are a reflection of you?

Fan: Everyone wants to say f--k you to their boss once in a while. And there are people like Batista who are repressed by those around them. And on Smackdown, there is this guy John Sena, who’s kind of this low-life thug who wouldn’t make it in the real world who is kind of jumping up and that kind of appeals to people, I think.

Me: So ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Fan: Exactly. I think that’s the best way to put it.

The wrestling script-writer that was interviewed for this piece had the following to say on the issue:

“Current story-lines are based upon reality. Past story-lines were based more on fictitious characters and story-lines. Twenty years ago there was not a lot of script writing. At that time the promoter made all the calls. For example, in the WWF all of the shots were made by Vince McMahon Jr. The script writer really did not evolve up until the early 90’s”.
So in professional wrestling, rather than just observing the show, the wrestling fan becomes part of the show and internalizes the perceived emotions and thoughts of the characters within the show. The advent of the script-writer is a testament to this phenomenon. During the Golden Age of wrestling, as the script-writer interviewed for this paper reveals, there was not a creative team in place to conceive of characters and story-lines. There was simply the promoter, and perhaps an executive or two that would find talent and have them play one of about five different characters (the effeminate, the narcissist, the foreigner, the golden hero, or a mythical masked character). This is no longer the case.

The development of a creative team and the careful creation of characters in the new era of professional wrestling points to the increasing complexity of both the entertainment form and its audience.

"In the past, the (wrestling) business was looked at and thought of in a very simplistic form of good guy versus bad guy. In today’s environment, we know very few good guys and very few bad guys. All of it are shades of grey”.

- Vince McMahon
  (in Mortensen, 1999)

While this type of identification with wrestling characters has obviously existed at least as long as pro-wrestling itself has, the creation and subsequent proliferation of the anti-hero hero has allowed this aspect of the appeal of professional wrestling to flourish. The anti-hero hero seems more tangible to audiences than was the classic “Golden Boy” hero.
He is no longer purely "good". Like the average fan, he is both "good" and "bad", anti-hero and hero, and fans identify with this.

While it would be naïve to suggest that Vince McMahon's superior marketing strategies were not part and parcel to the unprecedented success of his "Sports Entertainment" franchise, as he has virtually flooded all forms of media with his product, the fact remains that the product that he puts "on the mat" and the appeal of the story-lines that he and his writers conjure up and pursue is ultimately the source of his success. The defiant new hero is his most recent invention, and managed to help spark interest in professional wrestling as never before.

In lay terms, it is perhaps summed up best in the following observation offered by the script-writer that was interviewed for this piece:

"Wrestling is a show. Wrestlers are created and re-created each and every time they go and wrestle. Back in the day, you had good vs. evil, Hogan vs. Andre, Rhodes vs. Flair. Just like Rocky vs. Clubber Lang in Rocky III, everyone is rooting for the good guy or the underdog. That was the way it had been for many years. Nowadays in some cases it is good to be bad. The fan is living through his hero whether he be bad or good. But this trend all started with Steve Austin. He came to the WWF as the bad guy (heel) who was going to beat the s--t out of the hero, Bret Hart. But with Austin being bad was actually cool. He could do no wrong. It was cool to swear, chew tobacco, and drink beer. The whole trend was created around that time. It is cool to be bad. Wrestlers are based on trends. What is popular now may not be popular tomorrow. But in the last decade, fans are much more involved with their heroes, living vicariously through this new rebel (anti-hero) hero. You will see this trend for many years to come, back in the golden years the fans were not so in tune with their heroes. Sure a guy like Hogan said eat your vitamins, say your prayers, train, don't smoke. That was all bulls--t anyways. Kids under the age of twelve believe in that. Anyone older knew otherwise. We will see
more bad-ass (anti-hero) heroes evolve over the next few years, whether it be WWE or Indy promotions”.

**Conclusion:**

“The whole movement of wrestling has changed. Back in the 80’s and prior, it was always just good and evil, you had your poster child, you would know who was good, you would know who was bad. There would be the odd twist, but now bad is good. Before it used to be athleticism or the freak, the beauty, brains or the brawn, not any more.

- Wrestling Promoter

“Our (North American) culture very much wants what pro-wrestling will give. We are an age without mythology, we are an age with a kind of spiritual quest that’s unfulfilled in churches and other places, but the images in wrestling can fulfill it” (Morton, in Mortensen, 1999).

Professional wrestling in the late 1990’s and into the new millennium has taken the spectacular and transgressive nature of the carnival to new heights. In the Golden Age of pro-wrestling, the mere presence of the rule-breaking, non-conforming villain (and the hero’s battles with him) was enough to draw audiences. Today’s wrestling fan, on the other hand, is no longer hostile towards certain behaviours that were considered inappropriate during the Golden Age of wrestling. Their transgression has essentially taken a new form, celebrating the challenge to the established order by rooting for the hero that opposes it. Wrestling fans no longer attend matches and watch wrestling on television to celebrate the maintenance of order. Rather, they seem more interested in the challenges to it.
In an age where the established order is increasingly perceived to be largely defined by capitalist intentions and the “oppressive corporation”, the “greedy capitalists” have become the villain. Rising up against that villain is celebrated. “Stone Cold Steve Austin” and “The Rock” were pitted against the man who signs their cheques “Mr. McMahon” in the late nineties and early 2000’s, and “Batista”, the latest anti-hero hero is rising up against Mr. McMahon’s son-in-law “Triple H” in the WWE’s current central story-line. Modern day professional wrestling, as opposed to that of the Golden Age, ostensibly gives license to violate the rules within the safe walls of its arena. It is therefore liberating for its followers who are presumably unable to commit such violations in their daily lives. In effect, they live vicariously through the rebellious anti-hero hero.

Moreover, the wrestling characters are (or at least have the illusion of being) more tangible individuals, intended to be viewed as real people with real names and real concerns, thereby tapping into the psyche of equally real people with real concerns. The heroes in professional wrestling are not as iconic and mythical as they once were. In an increasingly diverse and complex North American society, we have increasingly complex wrestling personalities and an increasingly complex fan base to support them. Perhaps as a symptom of late modernity, where things no longer seem black and white, professional wrestling may simply be following suit. The biker’s cheer for the biker hero, the Mexican-Americans cheer for the latin hero, the African-American’s cheer for the African-American hero, and they all cheer for the anti-hero hero.
Although exhaustive marketing and the rapid expansion of media forms have facilitated its unparalleled success, it is ultimately the physical product in the "squared-circle" which dictates the success of professional wrestling. This product, the actual wrestlers, comes about by the careful creation of characters that are intended to meet the demands of predominantly American audiences, and adjusts accordingly to the current moment in the larger society. In this "age without a mythology", people seem to be increasingly filling this void with media characters. In the case of professional wrestling, fans appear to simultaneously identify with and believe in their favourite characters.

Today's version of professional wrestling represents the Rabelaisian Carnival more than ever, as the hero is now constructed around the notion of a challenge to the prevailing order and the oppressive nature of routine. The wrestling fanatic seems to identify with the hero and thus uses him to cope with his or her own frustrations, or even his or her oppression. While the pursuit of justice is still the drawing feature of the re-defined hero, the definition of justice appears to have changed. That is, justice in wrestling today is resisting the oppressive forces of routine, management and ultimately, order.

The explosion of popularity of and relative lack of academic research on professional wrestling is undeniable evidence that professional wrestling begs further investigation. Aside from a few ground-breaking pieces, which have used wrestling and its appeal to massive audiences in revealing larger social patterns, very little academic research has been conducted (there are under twenty published academic pieces total).
My intentions for this paper were to investigate a grossly under-investigated area of sociological research, the appeal of American professional wrestling to predominantly American and Canadian audiences. What I realized along the way is that I simply scratched the surface of a very rich social phenomenon, and the limitations of this modest endeavor became evident. My hope is that someone who reads this piece may find the topic as enticing as I have, and perhaps even build upon some of the ideas that were touched on in this paper. As it is my sincere belief that professional wrestling holds up a mirror to the society around it, a systematic sociological investigation would prove useful in revealing trends across class, race and gender.

Specifically, I invite researchers to further examine pro-wrestling character development as it relates to post-modernism (blurring boundaries, in the WWE and in late modern capitalist societies). In addition, a more detailed analysis of the transgressive and identity-based components of the appeal of professional wrestling, perhaps building directly on some of the ideas presented in this paper, would also prove beneficial in revealing larger patterns, particularly how they relate to class and race. Ideally, a more in-depth study would be conducted by individuals who have access to Vince McMahon’s own writing team, as they are paid large sums of money to have their finger on the pulse of contemporary American (and Canadian) society.

While Vince McMahon still enjoys absolute power in the mainstream wrestling world, he nevertheless faces two looming challenges to his monopoly. First, if the central storyline returns to American jingoism and xenophobia, which is entirely possible given
America’s current political climate ("Us" against "Them" (The World) mentality of the current American government), it could pose a significant problem for the WWE. Unlike in the past, where casting the American political enemy as the “heel” was a guaranteed success, it is no longer a reliable story-line to pursue, as “they” are here, and their numbers are growing. Second, and relatedly, while the recently constructed grey hero has specific characteristics that the fans find appealing, the lack of clarity he represents also poses a potential problem. Our increasingly secular society may pose as big a problem to McMahon as it has to many governments around the world: there are simply too many different types of people to please, and a lack of a solid universal ideology for people to cling to (other than the anti-hero, as this paper suggests).

During the peak period of the late nineties and early 2000’s, during the intense real-life competition between the WCW and the WWF, the fight for survival forced each side to raise the stakes in the battle for pro-wrestling supremacy. Since taking over the WCW, McMahon admits that having no competition has been his greatest challenge. While his pro-wrestling monopoly is secure for the time being, he may lack the competition that is perhaps necessary to push wrestling back to the peak levels of popularity enjoyed at the turn of this century.

In recent times, there has been another dip in fan support, partly because of this lack of managerial competition, but also because the WWE has not been able to replicate a character that so perfectly encapsulates the intangible tangible as The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin. Austin’s chronic knee and back problems have kept him out of the
arena, and The Rock, all too aware of wrestling’s physical demands, has successfully made the jump to major motion pictures. However, history has shown that professional wrestling always bounces back, usually stronger than ever. In any case, with “Mr. McMahon” leading in the pushing of the envelope, one thing is for certain... it will be interesting.
References:


APPENDICES

INTERVIEW SCHEDULES
APPENDIX I: Sample Interview Questions for an Informed Wrestling Fan:

Interviewing the wrestling fan was central to this study. It is important to understand what, in the fan's own words, is appealing about professional wrestling as an entertainment form.

First of all, do you have any objections to me taping this interview? {If no, then proceed.}

1) What is your current age?
2) What is your ethnic background?
3) What is your occupation (if any)?
4) What is the extent of your formal education (how far did you go at school)?
5) What is your net family income?
6) When did you become interested in professional wrestling? Why did it appeal to you?
7) How many years have you been watching professional wrestling? How often do you watch? Do you attend pro-wrestling events? If so, how often?
8) How would you characterize your level of wrestling knowledge?
9) How would you characterize your level of wrestling fanaticism? Explain.
10) Who is/are your current favourite wrestlers? Who are the “heroes”?
11) What are the main characteristics that you find MOST appealing in your favourite wrestler(s) (the heroes)? Why?
12) Who is/are your current least favourite wrestlers? Who are the “heels”?
13) What are the main characteristics that you find LEAST appealing in your least favourite wrestler(s)? Why?
14) Has watching wrestling changed you, personally, in any way since you’ve been a fan? If so, in what ways?
15) How many live events have you attended?
16) Do you find live events more or less appealing than watching wrestling on television? Explain.

17) What is it about professional wrestling that draws you to it. In other words, why do you like watching professional wrestling? What does it do for you?

18) Do you think professional wrestling is authentic and spontaneous or staged and faked?

19) If you see it as staged (at least to some extent), why do you still find it appealing and worth watching?

20) How important would you say athleticism in pro-wrestling is in terms of audience appeal (the muscles, jumps, flips, death defying maneuvers)? Has this changed over time? Explain.

21) How important would you say characters and story-lines in pro-wrestling are in terms of audience appeal? Have they changed over time? Explain.

22) Would you characterize professional wrestling as theatre, sport or some combination of both? To what extent are the characters themselves appealing to you versus the sheer athleticism of the wrestlers? Which do you find more appealing, the characters or their athleticism? Explain.

23) Would you like to add anything else?

**Follow-up Questions for Wrestling Fan:**

1) What is/was it about arguably the most successful character(s) in pro-wrestling’s recent history (next to Hulk Hogan, of course) “Stone Cold Steve Austin”, that made him so popular?

2) Would you say then that wrestlers currently play themselves (as opposed to say ten years ago and prior) and that fans identify with that?

3) When you are watching your favourite wrestler, do you feel that you share in his successes and failures in a given match? Explain.

4) To what extent would you say that you are cheering for him and to what extent are you cheering with him?

5) Would you say that you are emotionally linked with him when you are yelling and screaming at the television set?
6) What is at stake for you emotionally if he loses or if he wins?

7) So are you glad for him or are you glad for you or a bit of both? Explain.

8) To what extent do you feel that you understand your favourite characters motivations/goals for what they are doing? For example, when Dave Batista recently escaped the reign of “Triple H”.

9) Would you say that fans are more thoughtful about their favourite characters than in the past?

10) What is an example of a character whose motivations you understand, and what, would you say, are those motivations?

11) So do you relate with his motivations? Is that what it is?

12) To what extent do you feel that you share the goals of your favourite character? Are some of your views on your favourite characters/characteristics based on your personal experience as well?

13) When you are watching wrestling, how involved do you get in the action? To what extent do you “lose it”?

14) How much would you say that your favourite characters are a reflection of you?
APPENDIX II: Sample Interview Questions for a Professional Wrestler:

For this study, it is important to understand professional wrestling from the perspective of the wrestler himself, as he sees first hand what excites audiences and what does not. The wrestler is also in a unique position to reveal some of his instructions for character selection/development.

First of all, do you have any objections to me taping this interview? {If no, then proceed.}

1) What is your current age?
2) What is your ethnic background?
3) What is your occupation outside of pro-wrestling (if any)?
4) What is the extent of your formal education (how far did you go at school)?
5) When did you become interested in professional wrestling? Why did it appeal to you?
6) How did you get started?
7) How many years have you been a professional wrestler? How many live events have you wrestled in?
8) What is the name of the wrestling character you are currently playing (if at all)? How long have you been playing that character?
9) How would you characterize your level of wrestling knowledge?
10) How would you characterize your level of wrestling fanaticism?
11) What are the things you like most in being a wrestler? Why?
12) What are the things you like least in being a wrestler? Why?
13) Has wrestling changed you, personally, in any way since you’ve been a wrestler? If so, in what ways?
14) What is it about professional wrestling that draws you to it? In other words, if you can sum up the reasons, why did/do you wrestle professionally?
15) During your time as a professional wrestler, have you noticed any changes in how wrestling is scripted? What are your views on the current and past story-lines? How would you compare wrestling scripts say twenty years ago with those of the present?

16) What, in your opinion, explains why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades?

17) During your time as a wrestler, have you played more than one wrestling character? Were any of them your idea, or were they ideas given to you by someone else in the industry? Who?

18) If yes to the previous question, which, if any characters were more successful in terms of audience response than others? Why?

19) What is the foundation upon which wrestling characters are created (in the WWE or otherwise)? Why do characters and story-lines go in the directions they go?

21) How important would you say athleticism in pro-wrestling is in terms of audience appeal (the muscles, jumps, flips, death defying maneuvers)? Has this changed over time? Explain.

22) How important would you say characters and story-lines in pro-wrestling are in terms of audience appeal? Have they changed over time? Explain.

23) If I were to propose the idea that pro-wrestling is both theatre and sport, would you say that overall wrestling is appealing to audiences as one more than the other, theatre or sport? Which one, and why?

24) My suggestion in this thesis is that pro-wrestling (WWE at least) has moved from a fringe “freak-show” to a mainstream form of “sports-entertainment” by tapping into audiences like never before. This seems to have coincided with the success of the creation of a new hero, the anti-hero hero that rises up against the corporate oppressor and has a brash, no-frills style. The suggestion is that the construction of this anti-hero hero has rapidly expanded pro-wrestling’s appeal from sheer theatrics and athleticism to a more conscious identity-based appeal, where the wrestling fan more deeply identifies with particular characteristics of the newly constructed hero, in this case the no-frills transgressive nature of characters like the WWE’s Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin or Dave Batista (put loosely, fans yelling and screaming at the bad-ass (anti-hero) hero as an escape from their oppressive routines, where they are perhaps unable to break the rules). How do you respond to this suggestion? Basically, do you think I have something here? What, in your opinion, are some of the factors for why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades? Please explain.

25) Would you like to add anything else?
APPENDIX III: Sample Interview Questions for a Wrestler/Promoter:

During my search for pro-wrestlers, I came across one individual who both wrestled professionally and produced/promoted his own live events. This set of questions was specifically designed for the one individual, who proved to be my key informant. As a wrestler and wrestling promoter, he was in a unique position to reveal some aspects of the business of wrestling, and specific successes and failures of character construction.

First of all, do you have any objections to me taping this interview? {If no, then proceed.}

1) What is your current age?

2) What is your ethnic background?

3) What is your occupation outside of pro-wrestling (if any)?

4) What is the extent of your formal education (how far did you go at school)?

5) When did you become interested in professional wrestling? Why did it appeal to you?

6) How did you get started?

7) How many years have you been a Professional Wrestler? How many live events have you wrestled in?

8) What is the name of the wrestling character you are currently playing (if at all)? How long have you been playing that character?

9) How would you characterize your level of wrestling knowledge?

10) How would you characterize your level of wrestling fanaticism?

11) What are the things you like most in being a wrestler? Why?

12) What are the things you like least in being a wrestler? Why?

13) Has wrestling changed you, personally, in any way since you’ve been a wrestler? If so, in what ways?

14) What is it about professional wrestling that draws you to it? In other words, if you can sum up the reasons, why did/do you wrestle professionally?
15) During your time as a professional wrestler, have you noticed any changes in how wrestling is scripted? What are your views on the current and past storylines? How would you compare wrestling scripts say twenty years ago with those of the present?

16) What, in your opinion, explains why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades?

17) During your time as a wrestler, have you played more than one wrestling character? Were any of them your idea, or were they ideas given to you by someone else in the industry? Who?

18) If yes to the previous question, which, if any characters were more successful in terms of audience response than others? Why?

19) What is the foundation upon which wrestling characters are created (in the WWE or otherwise)? Why do characters and story-lines go in the directions they go?

20) How many years have you been a promoter for professional wrestling? For which company do you work for and out of which city?

21) What is it about being a promoter that draws you to it? In other words, why are you a wrestling promoter? What does the job entail?

22) How do you market your shows? Are there specific elements of the show or characters that you use to draw people to your shows? If so, what are they?

23) During your time as a promoter, have you conceived of wrestling characters that were then played out by wrestlers? Which ones? Why? Explain.

24) If yes to the previous question, which, if any characters were more successful in terms of audience response than others? Why? Has this changed over time? Explain.

25) What specific characteristics do you look for in a good wrestler (in order of importance)?

26) How important would you say athleticism in pro-wrestling is in terms of audience appeal (the muscles, jumps, flips, death defying maneuvers)? Has this changed over time? Explain.

27) How important would you say characters and story-lines in pro-wrestling are in terms of audience appeal? Have they changed over time? Explain.

28) If I were to propose the idea that pro-wrestling is both theatre and sport, would you say that overall wrestling is appealing to audiences as one more than the other, theatre or sport? Which one, and why?
29) My suggestion in this thesis is that pro-wrestling (WWE at least) has moved from a fringe “freak-show” to a mainstream form of “sports-entertainment” by tapping into audiences like never before. This seems to have coincided with the success of the creation of a new hero, the anti-hero hero that rises up against the corporate oppressor and has a brash, no-frills style. The suggestion is that the construction of this anti-hero hero has rapidly expanded pro-wrestling’s appeal from sheer theatrics and athleticism to a more conscious identity-based appeal, where the wrestling fan more deeply identifies with particular characteristics of the newly constructed hero, in this case the no-frills transgressive nature of characters like the WWE’s Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin or Dave Batista (put loosely, fans yelling and screaming at the bad-ass (anti-hero) hero as an escape from their oppressive routines, where they are perhaps unable to break the rules). How do you respond to this suggestion? Basically, do you think I have something here? What, in your opinion, are some of the factors for why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades? Please explain.

30) Do you find that the anti-hero bad-ass no-frills hero is popular in your shows? If so, how long has been the case?

31) Would you like to add anything else?
APPENDIX IV: Sample Interview Questions for Pro-Wrestling Script Writer:

A professional wrestling script-writer is the most useful individual to interview for the purposes of this study. He/she is in a unique position to verify or invalidate my suggestions that hero re-construction as it relates to identity is an emerging basis for wrestling fanaticism, as the writer’s job is to create characters and story-lines based on such trends. These questions were submitted to a local script-writer via an anonymous e-mail interview.

1) What is your current age?

2) What is the extent of your formal education? (If post-secondary, what was the area of study?)

3) If you don’t mind me asking, what is your wage as a professional wrestling script-writer? Are most script-writers well paid? How did you (and they) get into this line of work?

4) When did you become interested in professional wrestling? Why did/does it appeal to you?

5) How many years have you been a script writer for professional wrestling? For which wrestling company do you work for and out of which city? (don’t answer this one if you don’t want to).

6) What is it about professional wrestling that draws you to it? In other words, why do you write for wrestling professionally?

7) During your time as a professional wrestling script-writer, have you noticed any changes in how wrestling is scripted? What are your views on the current and past storylines? How would you compare wrestling scripts say 20 years ago with those of the present?

8) What, in your opinion, are some of the factors for why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades?

9) What is the foundation upon which wrestling scripts are scripted? Why do the characters and story-lines go in the directions that they go?

10) During your time as a writer, have you conceived of wrestling characters that were then played out by wrestlers? Which ones? Why? Explain.

11) If yes to the previous question, which, if any characters were more successful in terms of audience response than others? Why? Has this changed over time? Explain.
12) How important would you say athleticism in pro-wrestling is in terms of audience appeal (the muscles, jumps, flips, death defying maneuvers)? Has this changed over time? Explain.

13) How important would you say characters and story-lines in pro-wrestling are in terms of audience appeal? Have they changed over time? Explain.

14) If I were to propose the idea that pro-wrestling is both theatre and sport, would you say that overall wrestling is appealing to audiences as one more than the other, theatre or sport? Which one, and why?

15) My suggestion in this thesis is that pro-wrestling (WWE at least) has moved from a fringe “freak-show” to a mainstream form of “sports-entertainment” by tapping into audiences like never before. This seems to have coincided with the success of the creation of a new hero, the anti-hero hero that rises up against the corporate oppressor and has a brash, no-frills style. The suggestion is that the construction of this anti-hero hero has rapidly expanded wrestling’s appeal from sheer theatrics and athleticism to a more conscious identity-based appeal, where the wrestling fan more deeply identifies with particular characteristics of the newly constructed hero, in this case the no-frills transgressive nature of characters like the WWE’s Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin or Dave Batista (put loosely, fans yelling and screaming at the bad-ass (anti-hero) hero as an escape from their oppressive routines, where they are perhaps unable to break the rules). How do you respond to this suggestion? Basically, do you think I have something here? What, in your opinion, are some of the factors for why professional wrestling has become so popular in the last decade over previous decades? Please explain (this is sort of the crux of the interview, so if you take a bit of time to answer this one I would really appreciate it).

Thanks a lot for doing this.

Harvey Jaswal (MA candidate, UBC Sociology).

Follow-up Questions for Pro-wrestling Script-writer (Unanswered):

Upon receiving the answers to the original interview questions, I sent the following questions back to the Script-Writer. He did not answer them.

1) When you say “back in the Golden years fans were not so in tune with their heroes”, what exactly do you mean? Does the average fan (male aged 17-35) identify more with the anti-hero hero than with the “Golden Boy” hero? How and why (or why not)?
2) In the shift in hero construction that I mentioned in the previous question (from Golden Boy to anti-hero), on what basis was that shift made? (Was it just trial and error and they stumbled across it or would you say that there was more calculation involved on the part of the scripters?

3) How do you assess how an audience will respond to a character/match? When does the character development become tiresome and call for another shift?

4) Can any wrestler play any type of hero or anti-hero, or are they recruited for different roles?

5) Is it a recent phenomenon that wrestler's seem to be playing “themselves” more than in previous wrestling era's (like Stone Cold says about his character, as a suped-up version of his redneck self)? What is it about this that fans find appealing? To what extent it is added believability (even though fans know it’s fake, they still seem to want to believe in the characters they adore), or identification with real people with real names doing unreal things?