


Please cite the Published Version

Litherland, Benjamin  (2022) Notes on Kayfabe. Pro Wrestling Studies Journal, 3 (1). pp. 123-128.

Publisher: Professional Wrestling Studies Association

Version: Published Version

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Notes on Kayfabe

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It entirely befits the concept that kayfabe risks engulfing the subfield of professional wrestling studies before professional wrestling studies has had time to do much of anything else. Kayfabe is professional wrestling's most unique and interesting feature, with arguably the most to offer the rest of the academy, while simultaneously being not especially interesting or unique at all. If *kayfabe* is everywhere—in politics, in academia, in apparently all our day-to-day interactions—is the object of study really *kayfabe* after all? Where does professional wrestling, a culturally important but nevertheless niche sporting entertainment, fit in in all of this? How do we pin down such an elusive concept, even as it “eludes ... academic authority” (Mazer 68)?

First things first, a history with which I am sure we are all now familiar (and if you are not, see Beekman; Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*). At the turn of the twentieth century, professional wrestling developed as a carnival sideshow and vaudeville entertainment where legitimate sportspeople demonstrated exhibitions as entertainments in addition to wrestling “legitimate” sporting contests. By the 1920s and '30s, the legitimate sporting competition had been disregarded almost entirely, and the exhibitions were all that remained. These exhibitions, however, continued to be presented by promoters and wrestlers as a legitimate sport. Various forms of entertainment—characters, masks, comedy, dramatic narratives between “good” and “evil”—were integrated into the show, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the local and national context. Claims of legitimacy were maintained, albeit with differing degrees of commitment, until the 1970s and '80s, producing a longstanding confusion from the press about professional wrestling's cultural status.

The fact that professional wrestling sits somewhere between sport and theatrical entertainment remains, frustratingly, important. I spent the early years of my postgraduate degrees tussling with, and trying to avoid, the question of defining pro wrestling in these terms. The answer seemed obvious—Both! Neither! *Does it even matter?* But as my work continued, the reason why this question emerged and re-emerged, in pubs and conference rooms, was that this was more than a mere definitional question. The stake of that question is really a desire to understand how

to culturally locate professional wrestling, and what critical lens you need to bring to it to make sense of it.

There's also a seeming broader desire to understand the borders and boundaries of the fictional text and how they are maintained. Plays are, usually, on the stage, and we understand an actor pretends to be someone else when they're on it. Sport pitches have their own rules separate to everyday life, but we recognize that there is a continuity from one to other. Professional wrestling operated the first while maintaining the second. For much of the twentieth century, the claim was that the wider performance expanded beyond the ring: characters in the ring were the same, or close enough the same, outside of it; performed injuries carried over into everyday life; good guys and bad guys, famously, never travelled together to the next show. Even more confusingly, sometimes this was blurred further: sometimes wrestlers kept their legal names, sometimes they didn't. Sometimes brothers were legitimate brothers, sometimes they weren't. Sometimes celebrities from beyond the world of wrestling punctuated the fictional world.

In the 120 years or so of professional wrestling's history, it has fallen between the different codes and conventions required of sport and entertainment, never being entirely comfortable as either, opportunistically drawing on both at different moments. It is also worth pointing out that neither sport nor entertainment are static entities and have their own overlapping histories and uneasiness with one another. (In my book, *Wrestling in Britain*, I used Bourdieu's work on fields to claim that the history of professional wrestling only makes sense when placed in the sporting field, but the central point I wanted to make was that fields are always contingent and reproduced socially.)

Though politicians, commentators and regulators might have been confused, understandably so at times, fans have never really been "fooled" by pro wrestling, despite what some wrestlers have convinced themselves about "marks" and the like. In my times in the archives, I've personally never seen any compelling evidence that audiences fully believed that what they were watching were sporting events. Audiences have, however, been consistently interested in making sense of the performance, even if they have been hampered by inconsistent access to its inner workings. There's a bit of suspension of disbelief, a desire to seek the authentic in the inauthentic, the joy in getting lost in the moment, and sometimes a desire to do the things that a good audience member would do.

Kayfabe, then, sits at the intersection of these histories: the contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in this type of performance; the sorts of relationship generated between performer and audience; and the different types of work required to uphold these systems. From these overlapping points, however, I want

to make two central observations about kayfabe, drawn from my own work studying the past and present of pro wrestling.

First. If all of the above sounds like a highly delicate balancing act, made up on the fly, with little to no internal or external consistency, precariously operated on the immediate needs and desires of individual promoters and performers, then that's exactly what it was. Modern fandom, and sometimes modern academia, sometimes speak of kayfabe in a type of hushed reverence about its broader social meaning, and the secrets passed down from one generation to the next, when for the most part it was developed by people looking to avoid taxes in one state, promote their next show via whatever outlets would have them, and worry about the consequences of their storytelling whenever it came to the boil.

As such, we should avoid speaking of kayfabe as an unchanging, universal quality that belongs to all professional wrestling in precisely the same way at the same time. The meaning of kayfabe, for performers and audiences alike, shifts over time. It is interlinked with changing attitudes about the meanings of sport, the types of relationships that audiences have to professional wrestling as a form, and to the shifting styles, promotional strategies and genres that have emerged at different times and places. In so doing, I think you can begin to speak of kayfabe as having different eras, and indeed as operating differently in different local and national contexts, but for now I am going to focus on history. Someone with more space might want to try and identify the specificities of those eras, but for now I'll give an example.

The presentation of professional wrestling in the halls in England in the 1930s was, for the most part, a contained event. The fictional world was confined to the match, and while there was a sense that the character existed outside of the ring, there was very little need to think about them in these terms, and very little supporting media to develop those personas. When wrestlers started appearing on television in the 1950s, logics of promotion required they do other media appearances to support these shows. This posed secondary questions about how you present that persona to the public outside of the hall itself. Continued synergy, and the expansion of promotional strategies by Vince McMahon in the 1980s, caused similar problems to arise in even more complicated ways, creating its own trial and error as performers like Hulk Hogan tried to convert their wrestling stardom to film stardom (Chard and Litherland). And reality television and social media has forced adaptation again (Litherland, "Breaking Kayfabe").

It remains vital when discussing kayfabe, then, that we locate the thing that we are referring to—audience reception and practices, the text, the persona—in its historical context. Not "pro wrestling" and "kayfabe," but specific promotions,

wrestlers, promotional strategies, types of performance, and so on. This is as true now, when comparing, say, European indies to the World Wrestling Entertainment as it is when comparing '90s *lucha libre* to Parisian all-in.

Second. To understand these different eras of kayfabe similarly requires us to understand historical developments in cultures of celebrity. I have been unable to untangle these two concepts in my own work. Celebrity is the management and organization of promotional, public, and mediated personas, with different fields and cultural forms developing their own rich codes and conventions. As we have seen, professional wrestlers have drawn on different codes and conventions at different times to suit their given needs, and have responded to broader social, political, and economic changes, as well shifts within the various cultural industries, just as celebrities have.

In this regard, some of the things that professional wrestling does are not quite as unique as professional wrestling scholarship can sometimes assume. Numerous performances insist on their own authenticity and resist revealing their secrets: freak shows, magic shows, etc. Lots of performances maintain the individual on the stage is a “real” person off it: comedy, television presenting. You can find plenty of examples of, say, fictionalized film stars, with biographies invented entirely by studio executives, who maintain their “realness” beyond the nicely contained fictional world on the screen. Professional wrestling shares a history of strained authenticity, incoherent biographies, and a longstanding trial and error from publicists, managers, studios, and celebrities themselves as they try and manage and develop these forms of presentation.

The pleasures and practices of audiences reading these celebrity texts, then, are in some regards the very same pleasures of kayfabe, even if professional wrestling has at times heightened them or created some interesting knots to untie. Here, I have always been particularly struck by Joshua Gamson’s work, and how comfortably professional wrestling maps onto not just his history of North American celebrity but the shifting cultural practices associated with them. Starting with PT Barnum and his sideshows, taking in the Hollywood studio system, and then television, he traces a history of playful audiences that grow increasingly sophisticated in reading the texts offered to them, and the shifts in the media and promotional industries as they respond in turn to those sophistication. Other scholars have influentially developed this reading in relation to social media (Marwick and boyd), something that, again, pro wrestling has similarly responded to.

By the postmodern 1980s, the levels of sophistication, rooted in complex intertextuality, have produced quite an intense level of scrutiny from audiences who

are able to respond quickly to notions of authenticity. Vince McMahon is often accredited with changing kayfabe forever, admitting to the New Jersey Senate about its performed nature (“Now It Can Be Told: Those Pro Wrestlers Are Just Having Fun,” The New York Times reported), but this is a simplification. Professional wrestling’s performed nature had been an open secret since the 1930s. Rather, this was part of a broader pattern of cultural change that the whole media ecosystem had undergone, incorporating postmodernity, emergent media technologies, and promotional strategies that developed from political economic changes.

Put another way, and as I argue in longer form pieces referenced above, the history of kayfabe is really a history of celebrity culture. When professional wrestling critics, fans, scholars and wrestlers themselves speak of kayfabe they are using a shorthand term for a set of pleasures and forms of presentation and reception that underpins the celebrity culture more generally. For reasons of historical accident, professional wrestling has a term for those pleasures. It is for this reason, then, that I think scholars, whether fans of professional wrestling who work in other fields or pro wrestling scholars who write about other aspects of culture, can often see kayfabe operating throughout society and culture. Celebrity has become increasingly important across any field that has been reshaped by the media, and there are very few fields where that is not the case. Today, anyone who has a social media account is doing a form of promotional and presentational persona management. Kayfabe is everywhere ultimately because celebrity is everywhere.

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