

Fantasy Wrestling as a Site of Competitive Fandom and Connected Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores *Over the Ropes*, a fantasy wrestling federation (FWF) that is part of the larger WWE fan community called the *Wrestling Boards*. Although more like a text-based RPG than traditional fantasy sports, it does carry the hallmarks of competitive fandom, including learning, play, and engagement as described by Halverson and Halverson (2008), just as more traditional fantasy sports. This paper explores a history of wrestling to underline the cultural importance of wrestling and then orients the activities of the FWF *Over the Ropes* as a competitive fandom and an example of connected learning.

Introduction

Professional wrestling traces its roots back to the nineteenth century (*Modern Wrestling*, 1895), and has thrived as a major pastime in North America for the past 30 to 40 years and in Japan for the last 20 to 30 years. WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is now the largest professional wrestling promotion group in the world. Professional wrestling continues to carry a cultural stigma of being decidedly lowbrow, much like video games (Sammond, 2005). Both are drawn into conversations in the media about their use of vulgarity as means of entertainment and are seen by many as places devoid of cultural value and as educational wastelands. But just as in the vast genre of video game entertainment, professional wrestling offers those who participate in it a variety of educational and culturally relevant experiences as will be touched upon in this paper.

This paper begins by introducing a history of professional wrestling to situate the present study. Next, I draw on data collected from an eight month ethnographic study of a wrestling community to provide an in-depth description of the FWF and illustrate how its competitive fandom operates. The paper closes with an analysis of three principles of connected learning which are strongly exemplified in this space.

History and Literature Review

Professional wrestling is, for many people, an enigma: it is a hybrid – part athleticism, part theater, and dubbed “sports entertainment.” The evolution of professional wrestling to its current state is not known to all and will be described briefly below. Ball (1990) describes the difference between amateur and professional wrestling.

That branch generally referred to as “amateur wrestling” provides a forum where, true to tradition, competing schools are represented by individuals who symbolize the positive characteristics of strength, skill, strategy, and adherence to the rules which the school claims to own. The second form is the relatively new phenomena of “professional wrestling.” Because the opponents have no explicit ties to schools, countries, or other significant groups, wrestlers are free to take on identities of persons or groups both within and outside their immediate society. The identities assumed by wrestlers and the alliance formed by them offer a rare opportunity to observe, on the one hand, the nature of stereotypes held by the organizers, the wrestlers, and the public, and on the other, the interests of the public revealed in the need for explicit stereotypes (pp. 3-4).

Due to the slow pace of standard wrestling at the professional level, professional wrestlers have been working off scripted routines since the 1930s (Ball, 1990). Fans did not like the slow pace of wrestling but were also upset when they found out that wrestling had been scripted to increase the pacing and excitement. Wrestling was one of the original broadcast sports due to its format of bouts which worked well for television advertising but lost favor in the 1950s because it did not fit the model of the 1950s family ideal. As wrestling progressed through the decades and reemerged on television in the 1980s it began to more heavily incorporate melodramatic elements.

Through a comparison to soap operas, Jenkins (2005) refers to professional wrestling as masculine melodrama. Ball (1990) states that the competitive elements are secondary to the drama before and after the match, although interview data from the present study suggests that both competition and melodrama are central to fan’s investment in the interest. Mazer (2005) views professional wrestling slightly differently than Ball and Jenkins, creating a more nuanced approach to the idea of wrestling as melodrama:

Professional wrestling is at once like life and like a lot of other things, theater and academia included: real and fake, spontaneous and rehearsed, genuinely felt and staged for effect, prodigious and reductive, profoundly transgressive and essentially conservative...Like Barthes, I frequently find the ecstasy of wrestling's rhetorical and metamorphic possibilities irresistible. Unlike Barthes, however, I have come to believe that what professional wrestling is most like is professional wrestling, (pp. 84).

Professional wrestling is in a category all on its own.

Because wrestling "gives people what they want", rather than adhering doggedly to any trite ideals of sportsmanship and fair play, wrestling is more reflective of public ideals and values than other sports... wrestling had few known rules--and these are rarely followed. Since rules are seldom enforced, this allows wrestlers to "read" their audience fabricating ritual drama at the audiences demand, (Guaranteed Entertainment, 1948: 51-52).

Wrestling fans appreciate the nuances of the entertainment they watch. "To know the rules by which the game of wrestling is played, not just the names of the moves, but the way the wrestling event is constructed by promoters, is to know how the game of life is played. Whether in the arena or in magazines and on the Internet, fans love to display their expertise. They are 'smarts', not 'marks'" (Mazer, 2005, pp. 75). They display this knowledge to each other through the many means of communication available, including social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), YouTube and Tout videos, forums, and wikis. These communication methods are also used to find peer groups who share WWE interests that, for adults especially, are not always readily available in the physical world. A more engaged level of participation in this fan community is to engage in one of the many fantasy role-playing games that are available to fans worldwide.

Fantasy wrestling is generally carried out in a text-based RPG format. Players develop their own characters and decide how the character looks; signature moves; whether he or she is a heel, face, or tweener (i.e., bad, good, or neutral/ambiguous, respectively); what their back-story is; etc. Sometimes the communities make wrestling promotion cards for their players. Each fantasy wrestling group has their own rules specific to the group, decided either by the person running the group who is known as the booker, much like a game master in a tabletop RPG, or by consensus from the group. Players need to understand the intricacies and nuances of wrestling in a sophisticated way and, as Mazer (2005) discusses, this requires knowing more than simply the names of the moves. They have to master the lore and discourse embedded in the wrestling sport as well as be able to create and maintain a persona that is congruous with the type of wrestler they described on their wrestling card. Players also have to be able to switch between personas fluidly while playing, interacting both as themselves and their characters.

Methodology

The data in this paper is part of a larger body of research on the professional wrestling fan community, the *Wrestling Boards*. This is an ethnographic study that employs a combination of observations of the online community and interviews with participants of the community. Observations lasted for eight months, from October 2012 to May 2013, and consisted taking fieldnotes on the conversations within the forum. Twenty-five interviews were conducted with participants in the community. Interviewees were solicited for openly on the forum as well as selected for their participation. The interviewees ranged in status and amount of participation on the forums, as well as what areas of participation on the forum, most interviewees were between 16 and 22. The interview protocol for these interviews were based off a base set of questions exploring connected learning (Ito et al., 2013) generally in online communities and then modified to fit the *Wrestling Boards* community taking into account how the community functions and what specific aspects of the community would be most poignant to explore. Interviews were conducted through chat or the private message system on the *Wrestling Boards*. The interviewees were also followed on the message boards to triangulate data from their interviews as well as to create a well rounded picture of participants and their interaction with the community. This community was very open and willing to talk about their experiences with their wrestling fandom, participation in the forum, and the fantasy wrestling federation, despite the fact that many faced social stigma in their community stemming from their interest in professional wrestling.

The interviews and fieldnotes were analyzed using an *a priori* qualitative coding scheme based on the connected learning principles (Ito et al., 2013) which can be seen in the Table 1 below. A description of the fantasy wrestling federation with this community, based on observation and interview data, appears below.

Connected Learning Principle	Subcodes
Interest Powered	-Invitations/exposures to interest -Information/knowledge seeking -Developing/seeking relationships centered on interest
Peer Supported	-Peer identity/interaction -Compliments and put-downs -Circulation and sharing -Resources sharing and trades -Inspiration and motivation -Feedback and help
Production Centered	-Production tools and opportunities -Seeing under the hood
Identity and Transitions	-Consequential transitions and role changes -Reputation management
Academically Oriented	-Recognition in school and academic identity -Career opportunities -Curricular forms of learning/content
Shared Purpose	-Community/social regulation -Collaboration/joint activity
Openly Networked	-Recontextualization and reframing -Mediational artifacts

Table 1: Connected Learning Coding Scheme

A Closer Look at the Fantasy Wrestling Federation

As mentioned previously, the studied fantasy wrestling federation (FWF), *Over the Ropes*, is part of the larger professional wrestling fan community named *Wrestling Boards*. It is an international community with members across the United Kingdom, Northern Europe, North and South America, and Asia. A majority of participants are between 16 and 25. It is a mixed gender community with anyone welcome to participate, although there are more males than females currently participating. The *Wrestling Boards* community has about 2000 members, but only about 100 participate in *Over the Ropes* with about 20 characters participating in a season of shows at a time. *Over the Ropes* is in its second iteration having just created a new universe about a month before data collection began, after several seasons of the previous universe, with each season lasting about four months. The entire FWF has been active for a little over a year.

At the beginning of each season, the booker puts out a call to the community for characters. Anyone is welcome to submit a character. The character submitted must be fully fleshed out including a developed backstory, information about the type of wrestler including signature and finishing moves, and must give a physical description of the character. Some participants use images to augment the physical description or to give examples of the attire. The booker decides which characters to hire, that is which characters are accepted to play in a current season, and asking for revision to the initial character to make the character a full description based on the template if

necessary. The booker then creates wrestling cards for each character with the images supplied by the player, these usually come from pictures of actual wrestlers or bodybuilders while some use the character builder in the WWE videogame to design their own character. Players also create managers, interviewers, and referees who all function in the storyline.

After the list of wrestlers for the season is hired the booker begins the process of setting matches. Each week's show usually consists of several matches, ranging from one-on-one, to tag team, to free-for-all. A preview card is posted on the forum at the beginning of the week and the players are supposed to participate in that thread, as well as rate the previous week's show, to gain points for the next week. The quality of the post as well as the quantity plays a factor in whether the player gets points to win their match. This means that the players, in kayfabe (i.e., in character), create feuds with other characters, especially those that they are matched with in the preview card. The feuds created by the players are woven into plot lines by the writers, who are community members with interest in creative writing and good grammar. The written show, sometimes up to 85 pages for one week, is put up for everyone to read. The community is then asked to rate the week's match for quality of writing, creativity, depth of story, and spelling and grammar using both written feedback and rating on a scale of 1 to 5. This feedback is considered and used to enhance the next week's match. After that the next week's preview card is posted and the cycle begins again.

Analysis

Players take pride in their ability to feud, develop rivalries, and create interesting storylines between their character and a rival player's character. Zach, a 17 year old from Europe, describes it like this, "I like having your own character and making him/her the way you want to be. I also like the fact that now how active you are helps with how your character performs. I've never seen the forum so active and it's just a lot of fun posting in character and typing up long posts and such telling off other wrestlers. Kind of makes you feel good." Shared purpose, a principle of connected learning (Ito et al., 2013), is a foundation of the functioning of the FWF. Again, Zach describes it like this, "I'd like to think that I work a comedian/snarky personality but I will get serious as well. I really look into *Over the Ropes* and try to help them improve it by writing reviews of their work so they can improve," adding that improving the writing and the quality of the show makes the entire community better. There is a shared purpose around an interest in this community and it is central to its energy and function as a place to improve skills.

The community is careful to distinguish play from real selves to create a safe space for everyone. Some players will post as their characters and then post as themselves under spoiler bars or by using /kayfabe to indicate when they have stopped talking in character. This practice is especially common when the interaction between two characters is getting heated and turns personal. The community enforces standards of conduct, so actually verbally attacking another community member would be unacceptable behavior. Maintaining community standards is a feature of the shared purpose principle. *Over the Ropes* and the *Wrestling Boards* use enculturation, as well as moderation, to enforce community norms. Crayo, the 19 year old founder and administrator from the UK, describes moderating arguments like this, "it's not like real-life arguments when most of the time there is a right or a wrong, it gets heated very fast online. The biggest challenge I face is keeping both those members happy and dealing with it where both members are satisfied. Sometimes it's an impossible task and I have banned members, but more often than not you help them 'make up' or you show them how to ignore each other."

The community is, like many fan communities, interest powered. The community members come to the *Wrestling Boards* and *Over the Ropes* because they are looking for community that shares their interest, many of them not finding that in the local physical community. Jose, an 18 year old from Europe, described his enjoyment of the community this way, "For someone who doesn't know wrestling fans in real life it is an easy and fun way to talk WWE and just have fun on the forum. The people were great from the beginning and were very open." Zach reiterates this, "It's nice to be on the forums because everyone loves WWE and likes to discuss it. It's like having that one friend who you can always relate to. Instead of a friend I have a whole forum to talk to about it." Again, Maria, 16 years old from the Philippines, talks about why she went in search of an online community, "Oh, it's not really popular in here. They actually think of me as a tomboy, 'cause they associate wrestling to guys." These participants, like many of my other interviewees, have the interest but no local community. Bret, 28 years old from the United States, summed up the role of interest in participation, "[Participating in the *Wrestling Boards* and *Over the Ropes* is] a chance to interact with people that have similar interests. To express my feelings to people that understand them."

The *Over the Ropes* community is also a production-centered. Maria, who has participated in *Over the Ropes* as a writer, "wrote for a while. [But now is] more of the checker, seeing if the shows were good and what things are lacking or wrong. I give my opinion about their [other participants] work/ideas, and I try to do requests." The creation of the show from start to finish is a major investment of the entire community. Rhashan, a 19 year old from the United States, emphasizes how his production is of a higher level than other community members, "I don't give

much feedback on *Over the Ropes* aside from the writing because no one else really does *Over the Ropes* like I do, to the extent of shooting real promos.” Mike, an 18 year old from the United States and one of first writers for *Over the Ropes*, describes his interest in the production aspects of the FWF, “To be honest, creative writing has always been something I have been fond of for awhile now. I was very good at it in high school so my teachers say. When the Federation was thought of, I knew right then I wanted to be a part of it. Since the federation needed writers, getting into it was just as simple as submitting a creative simulated match segment, or a backstory of a character you wanted to be featured in the show. Now that it has grown so much more; to become a writer, you must have been a member on the forum for at least 2 months, and have high quality posts and good grammar. You still also submit a creative writing piece.”

Conclusion

The FWF offers members of an interest-powered community the opportunity to come together and extend the means in which they are able to enjoy WWE. It also provides them the means to become producers instead of just consumers allowing participation (Jenkins, 2006), as well as to help them develop and use a wide range of 21st century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). From interviews conducted with the community, members perceive some of the learning benefits to include argumentation skills, accepting multiple points of view, collaboration, mentor and apprenticeship, as well as more traditionally academically oriented skills like improved creativity in writing, information seeking, and improved spelling and grammar. Similar learning experiences have been seen in the online communities of video games (Martin, 2012; Martin & Steinkuehler, 2010; Ochsner & Martin, 2012; Steinkuehler, 2011; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009). Each member gets to express their creativity and their vision for their character through the character card as well as practice and potentially improve their graphic design and technology skills at the same time.

This community also enables the players to use this environment as a point of connected learning (Ito, et al., 2013), tying their leisure space (interest-powered), their school space (academically oriented), and their peer space (peer-supported) together to support their goals. Mike, a writer for *Over the Ropes* as mentioned above, had a long-standing interest in creative writing. He was able to meld his interest in creative writing with his interest in wrestling. His writing was encouraged by his teacher and he plans to study creative writing as his minor in college. Beside the educational benefits of participation, winning matches offers its own rewards within the community. Winning brings status and reputation to the player because they demonstrate a high level of domain specific knowledge related to professional wrestling. A variety of “levels” of wins are available ranging from a single match to winning a title belt, just like in the real professional wrestling matches. The more matches a member wins the higher their status can climb in the community. The FWF offers members a variety of benefits for participation, social and learning related.

Over the Ropes offers its participants a safe space to explore their interest-powered fandom. The nature of the community creates production-centered activity and an atmosphere that supports members working toward a shared purpose. This competitive fandom (Halverson & Halverson, 2008) encourages fans to display their expertise, use strategy and creativity in tandem, participate in a discourse, and learn and develop life, academic, and social skills. *Over the Ropes* takes a new perspective on competitive fandom, is a powerful tool for its participants, and offers its participants all the benefits of both a competitive fandom and a connected learning environment.

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