



ENTERTAINMENT AT ALL COSTS



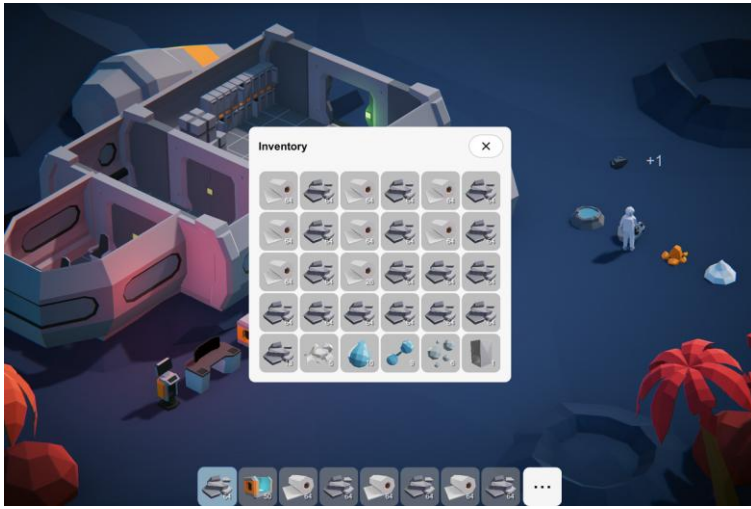
TONY PEIIIICONE



Che Wilbraham

Introduction

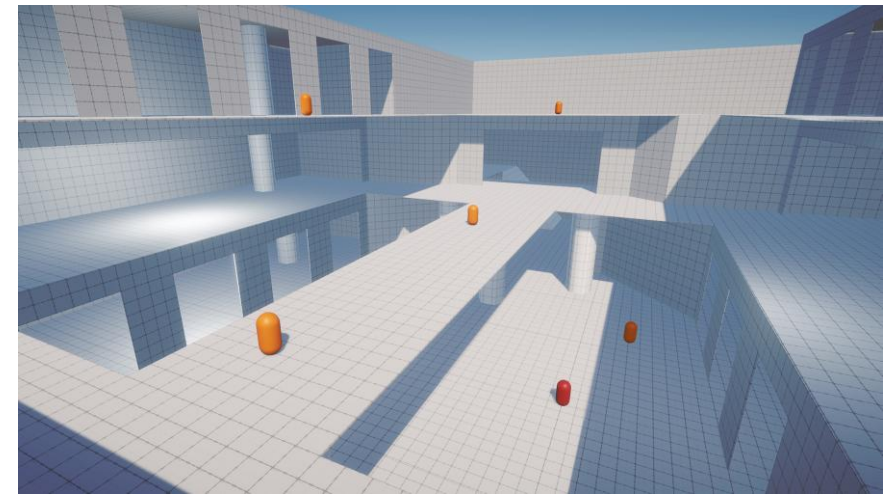
- Evolved from conversations around teaching game design. **What can we learn from peripheral game experiences?**
- Also came out of areas where we often need to guide students: What is appropriate challenge? What needs to be simulated? What do you take and what do you leave?



"Our game needs crafting."

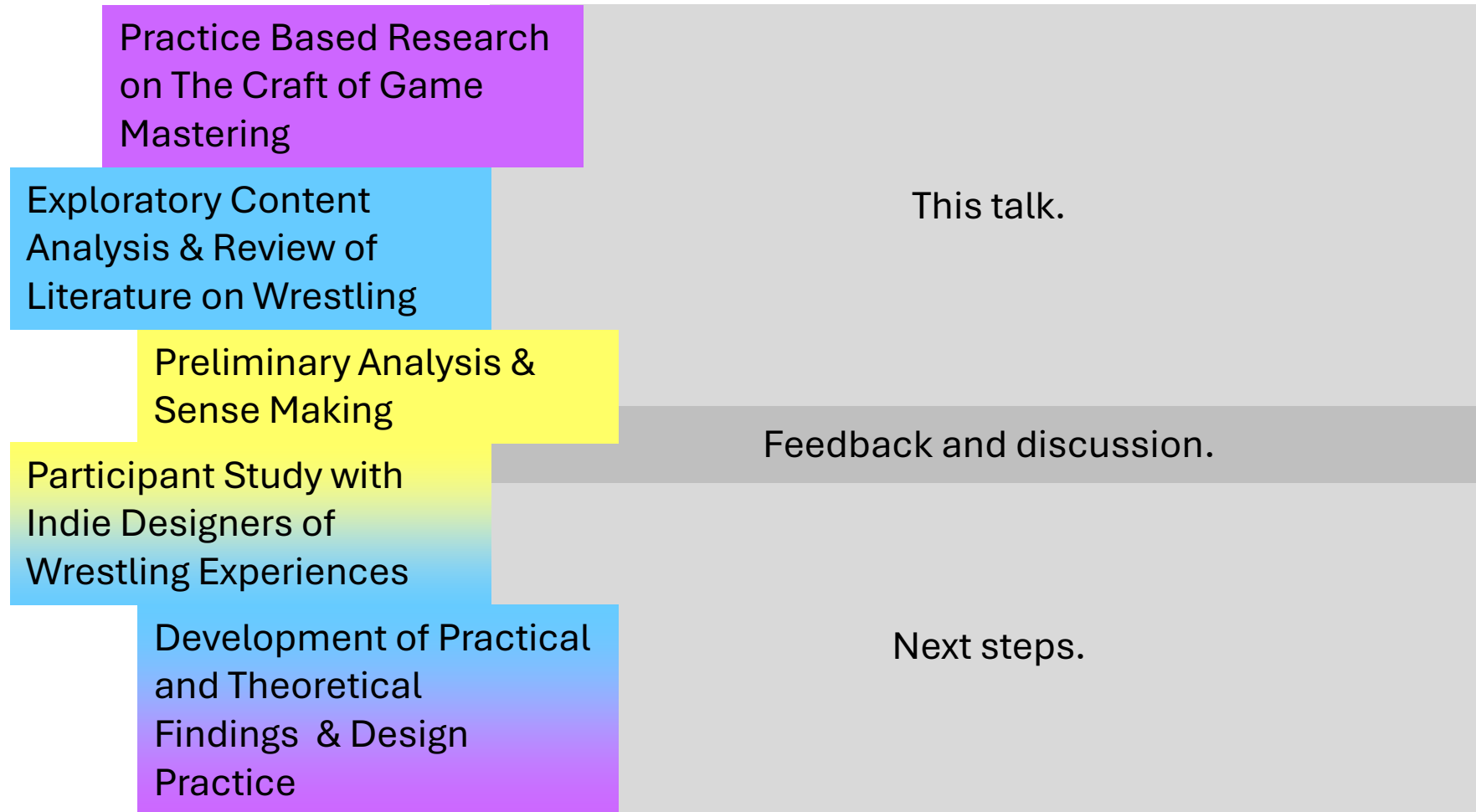


"Our game needs to be very hard."



"We need to realistically simulate our space."

Research Context

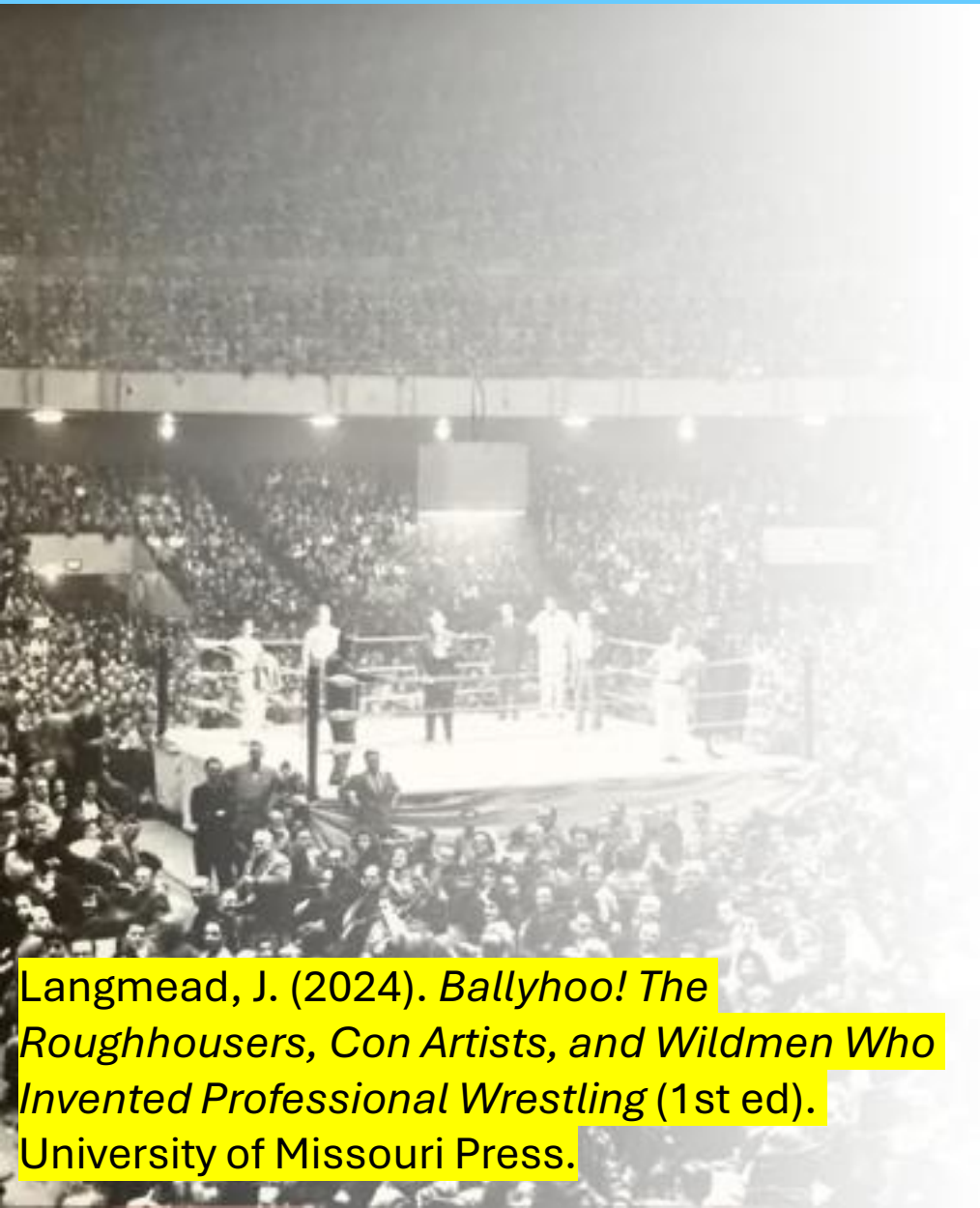


Convergent Narratives in Professional Wrestling



The Business

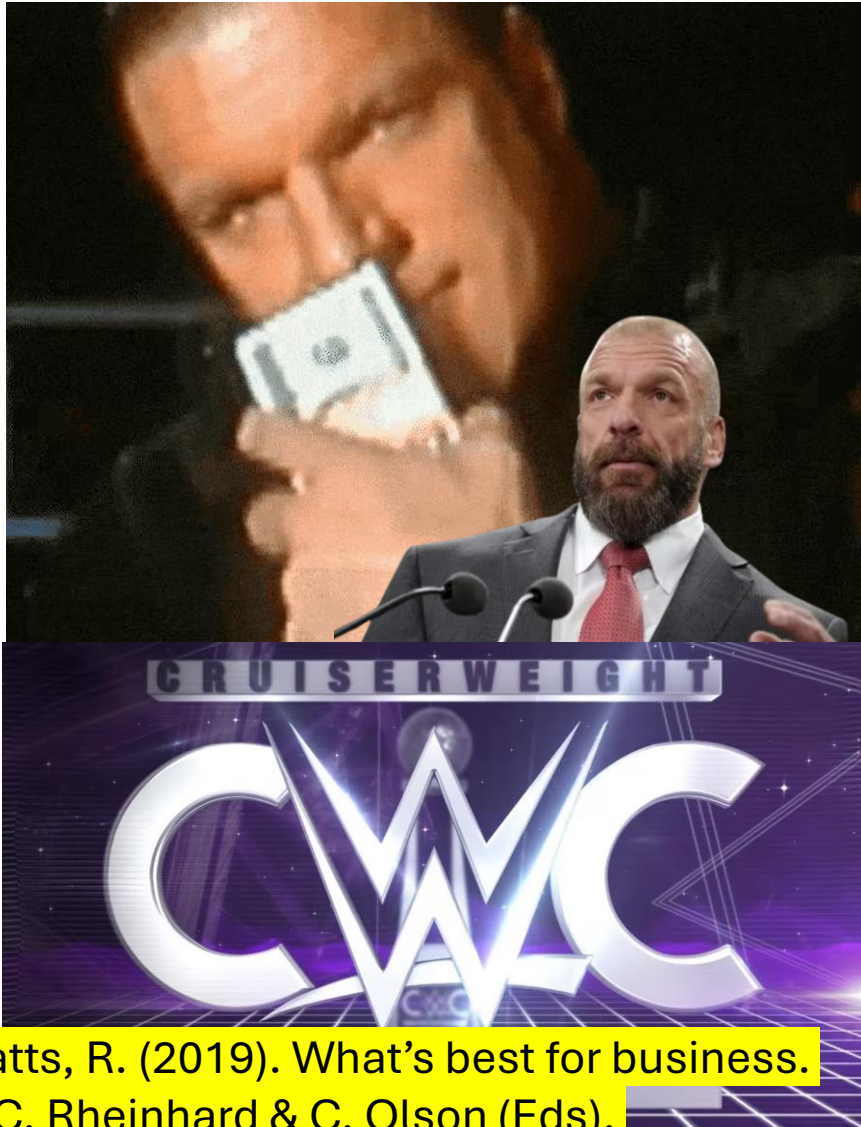
- Wrestling's origins come from using fictional framing as a marketing strategy, and a way to insure wrestler health.



Langmead, J. (2024). *Ballyhoo! The Roughhousers, Con Artists, and Wildmen Who Invented Professional Wrestling* (1st ed). University of Missouri Press.

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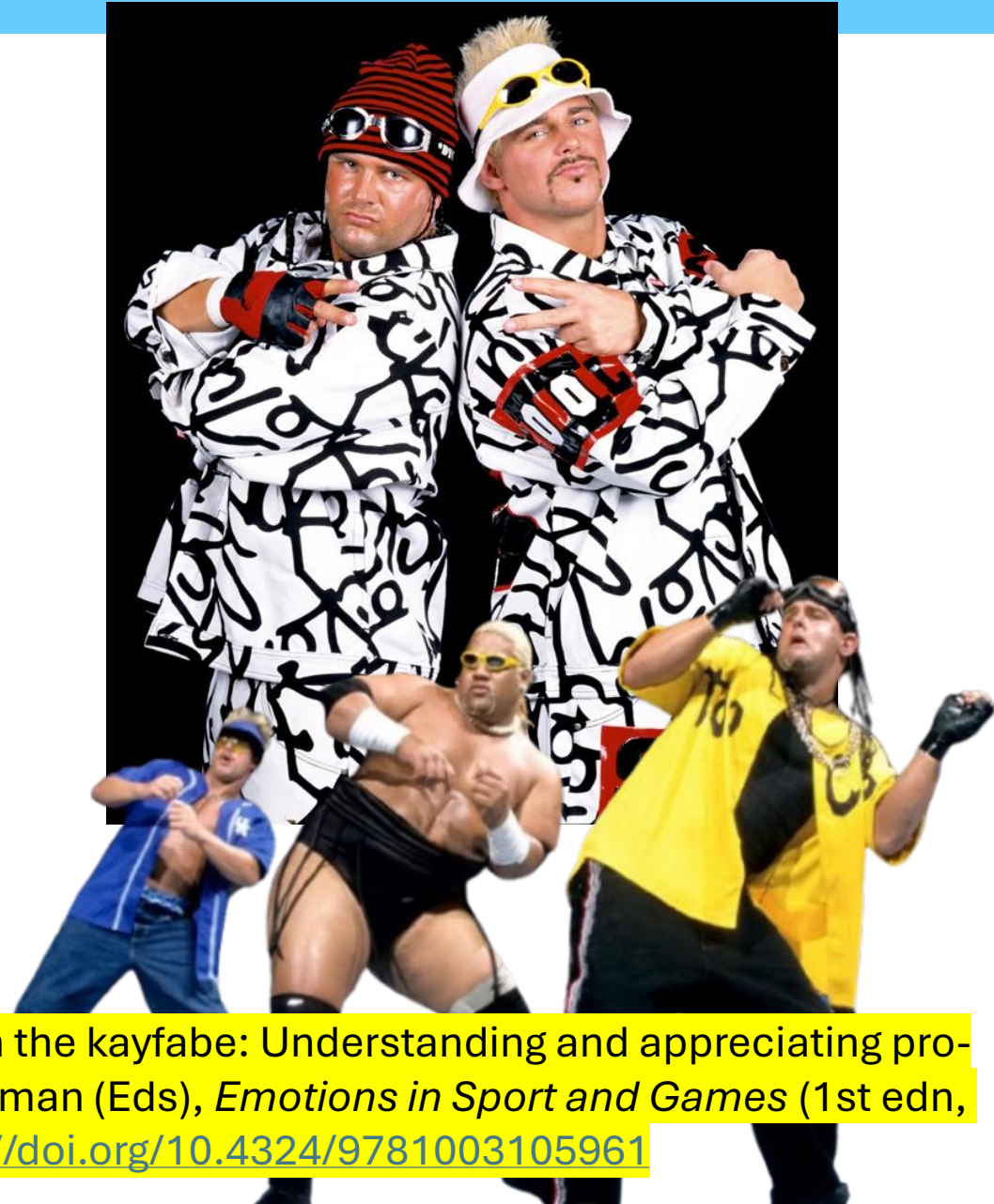
- Wrestling's origins come from using fictional framing as a marketing strategy, and a way to insure wrestler health.
- The business is brought in as a narrative element. This includes the use of real and fictional managerial figures as performers themselves.



Watts, R. (2019). What's best for business.
In C. Rheinhard & C. Olson (Eds),
Convergent Wrestling (pp. 149–163).

The Performers

- Performers are situated on a boundary of kayfabe and reality. Performers who are positioned as comedic, non-threatening, and low skill might actually be among the most successful outside of kayfabe. Similarly, a wrestler who never loses a match may be disliked.



Jones, L. (2020). All caught up in the kayfabe: Understanding and appreciating pro-wrestling. In A. Archer & N. Wildman (Eds), *Emotions in Sport and Games* (1st edn, pp. 162–178). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003105961>

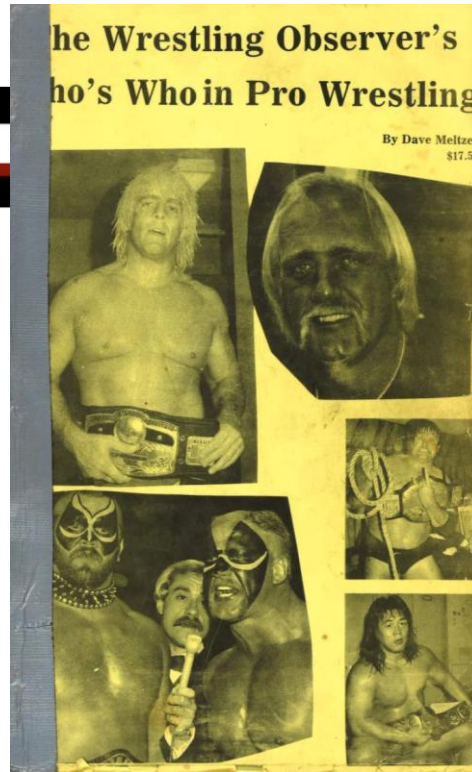
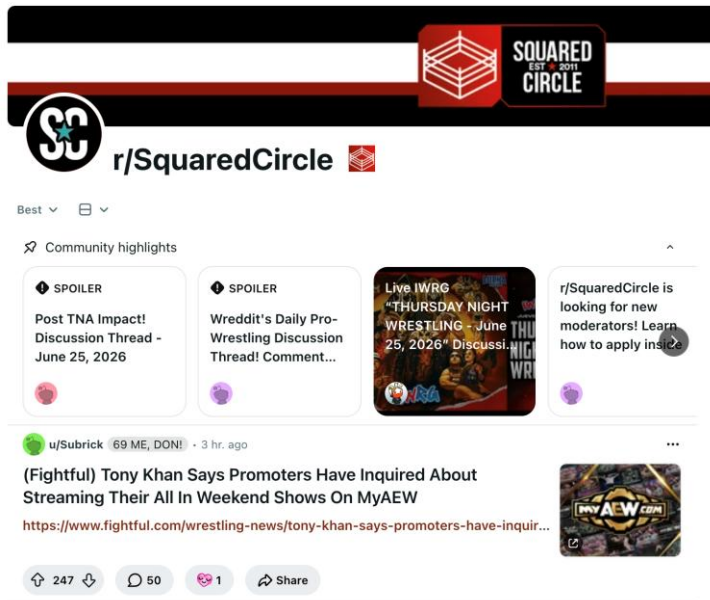
The Performers

- Performers are situated on a boundary of kayfabe and reality. Performers who are positioned as comedic, non-threatening, and low skill might actually be among the most successful outside of kayfabe. Similarly, a wrestler who never loses a match may be disliked.
- The in-ring performance is negotiated using an intentionally opaque and silly set of rules. Likewise, real-world out of ring behavior is often heavily moderated. The improvisational negotiation is a point of appreciation for fans.



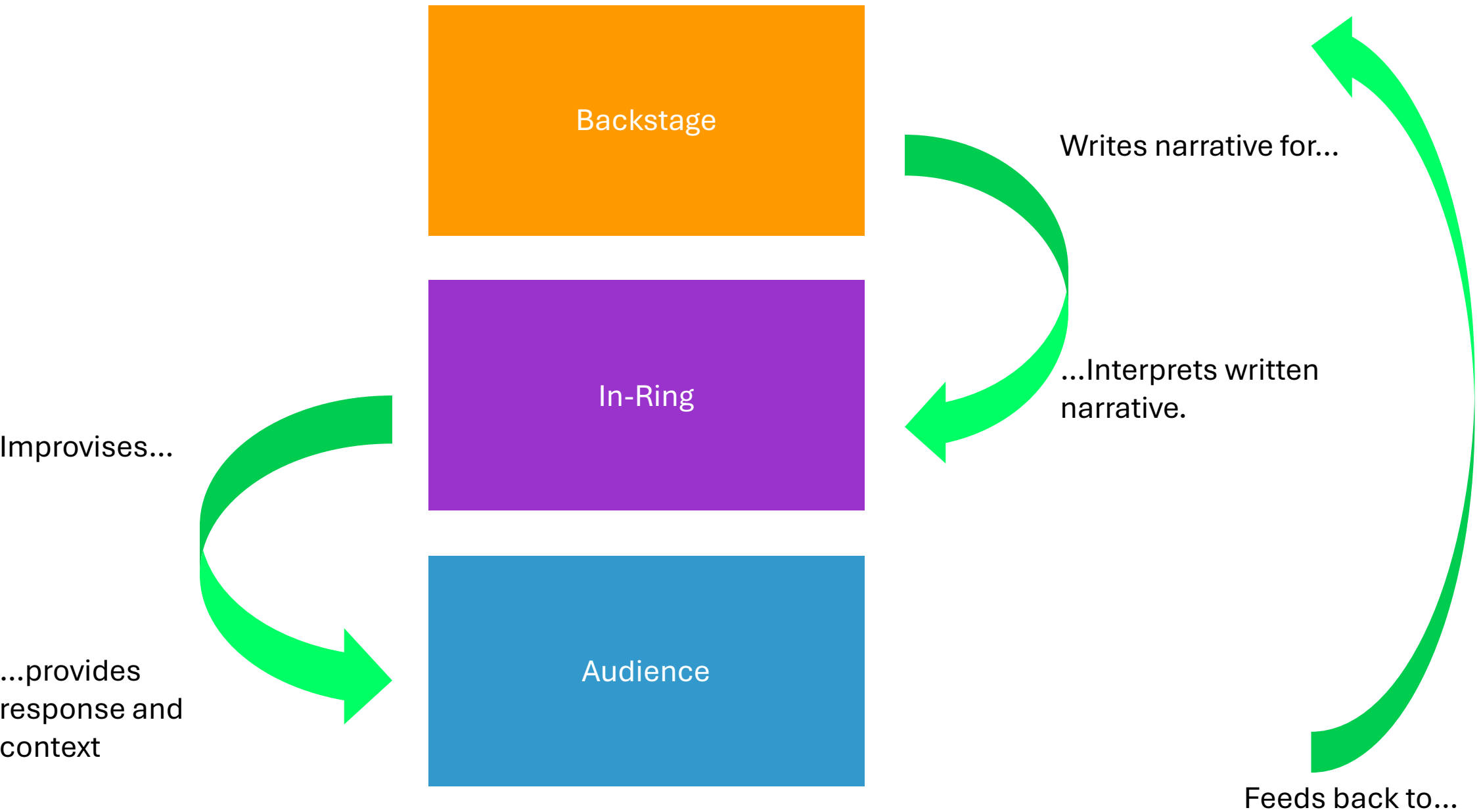
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Audiences



- Audience interactivity and the wobbly nature of kayfabe are things that attract audiences to the show. The 'co-production' of a live event is a major draw between fans.
- There is also a transmedial nature to this. Fandom extends to physical and online social spaces and feeds back into creative decisions at the level of the business and the performer.

Norman, C. (2019). Narrative Smarts: Negotiations of Creative Authority in Wrestling's Reality Era. In D. Jeffries (Ed.), *#WWE: professional wrestling in the digital age* (pp. 83–99). Indiana University Press.



Design at the Periphery

- Wrestling's convergent narrative has elements of interactivity: aspects of improvisation, performance, and scripting that place it on the periphery of traditional game design.
- We argue that wrestling shares quite a bit in terms of emergence, collaboration, and narrative structure with tabletop gaming. Thus, we turn to TTRPGs as an analytic lens that also helps us to take a step back into traditional digital game design.

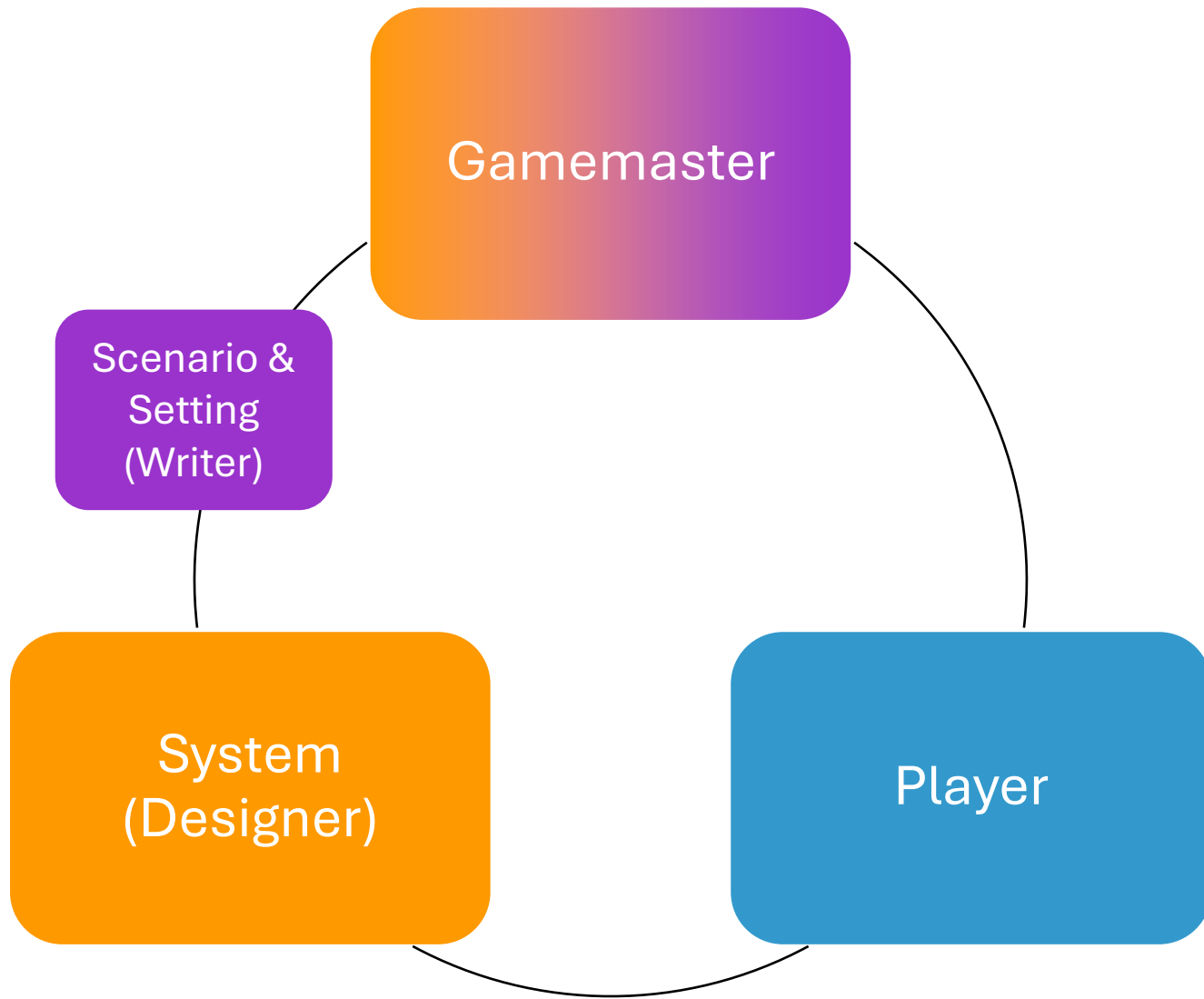
Constructing RPG Narratives

Roleplaying Games

- “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience”
- **Creating a narrative experience** is the reason for, and result of, the activity.



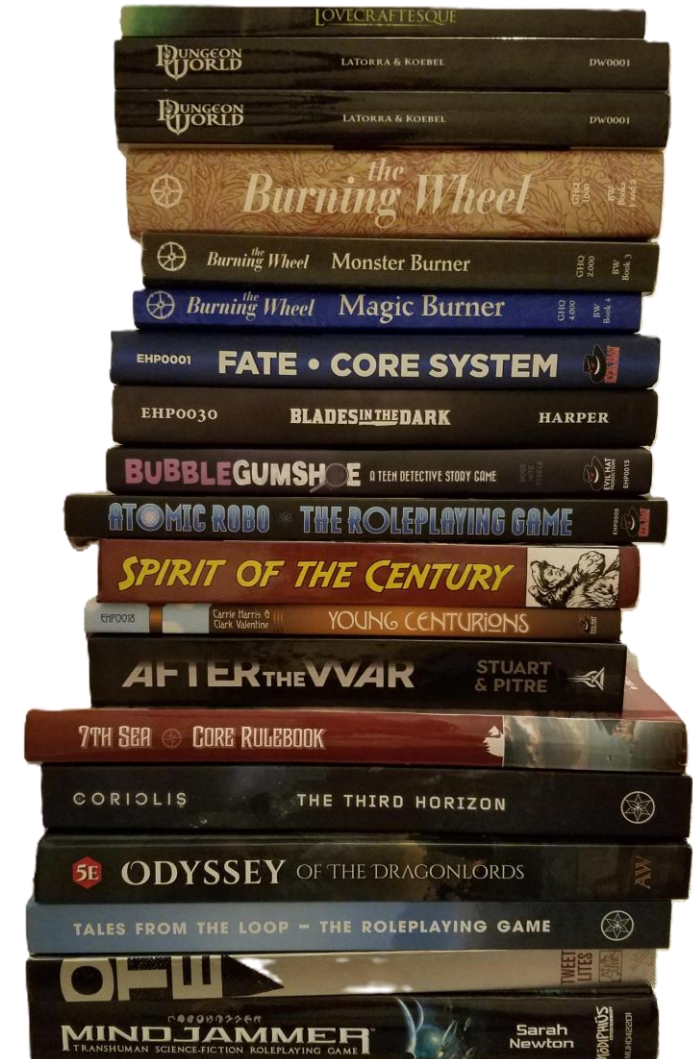
RPG Components



- The system may include a setting and/or scenario(s) to provide fiction to play in/through.
- These may instead come from a separate scenario or the GM.
- The play of an RPG is the result of these relationships, each acting on the action and story.

Power & “Credibility”

- “System (including but not limited to 'the rules') is defined as the means by which the group agrees to imagined events during play”



Edwards, R. (2004). *The Provisional Glossary*. The Forge. http://indie-rpgs.com/_articles/glossary.html

Power & “Credibility”

- “System (including but not limited to 'the rules') is defined as the means by which the group agrees to imagined events during play”
- Systems apportion “Credibility”, the power in an RPG. “If I say that I shoot you, and you say the gun jams, whose word do we take for it?”



Baker, V. (2002, October 4). *Vincent's Standard Rant: Power, Credibility and Assent* [Online post]. The Forge. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=3701>

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- The Gamemaster, via the system, is often the final arbiter of Credibility, but only as far as the rest of the group agree to keep playing.



Tychsen, A., Hitchens, M., Brolund, T., & Kavakli, M. (2005). The Game Master. *Proceedings of the Second Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, IE '05*, 215–222. <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1109180.1109214>

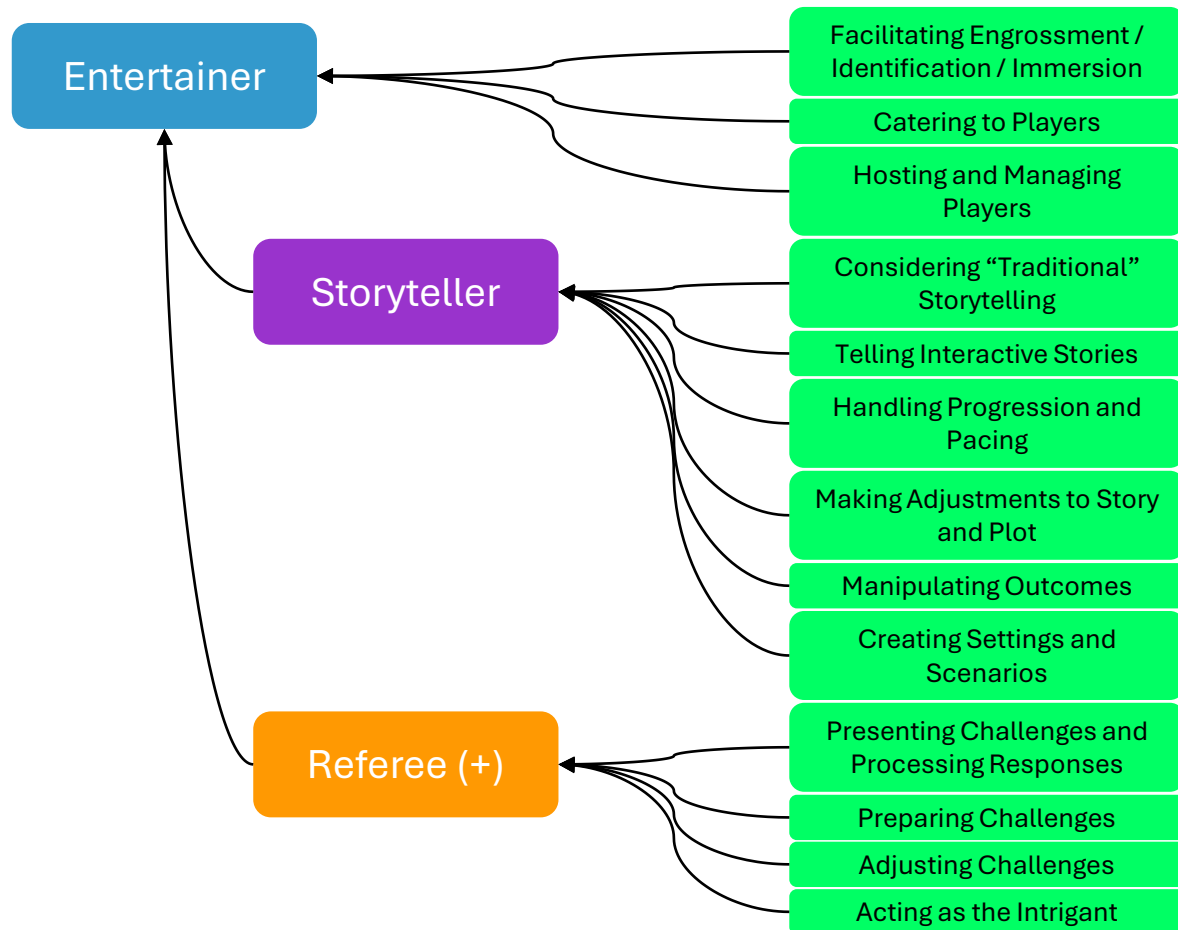
The Gamemaster



- “Roleplaying games are entertainment; your goal as GM is to make your games as entertaining as possible for all participants.”

Laws, R. D. (with Bergting, P.). (2002). *Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering* (S. Jackson, Ed.; First edition). Steve Jackson Games.

The Gamemaster



- “Roleplaying games are entertainment; your goal as GM is to make your games as entertaining as possible for all participants.”
- Gamemasters have one primary and two secondary sub-roles

Entertainer – maintaining the desired player experiences

Storyteller – various narrative functions, including creation and delivery

Referee (+) – adjudication, but also creation and adjustment of game elements

Participant Motivations

- Effective entertainment requires accounting for the desires and preferences of the participants, including the GM.



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Participant Motivations

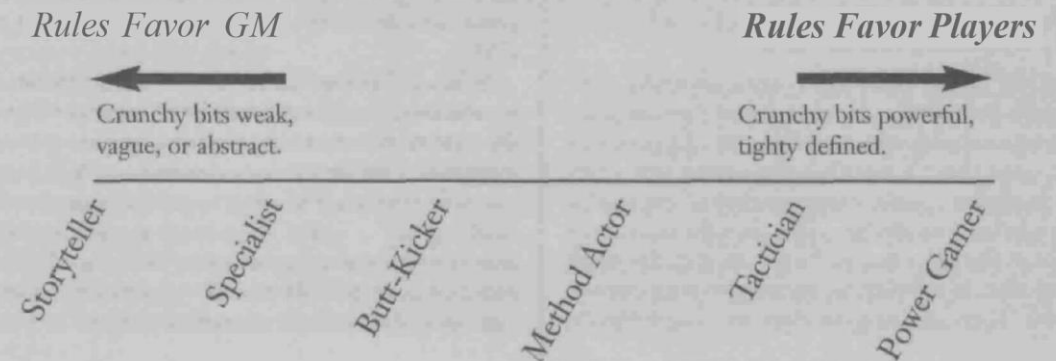
- Effective entertainment requires accounting for the desires and preferences of the participants, including the GM.
- Player typologies are useful as a lens through which a GM might consider player preferences.

What are the four aspects of adventure gaming? They are:

- I. *Power Gaming*
- II. *Role-Playing*
- III. *Wargaming*
- IV. *Story Telling*

Every game contains these aspects in at least a rudimentary degree, and the feeling of any given world is determined by the interaction of these four elements. But there are a large number of universes where development has overwhelmingly concentrated on a single one of the above facets. Much light on the question of ill-will within the hobby can be shed by first considering games with just a single major emphasis. So let us begin with... (Blacow, 1980)

Game Systems: Continuum of Crunchiness

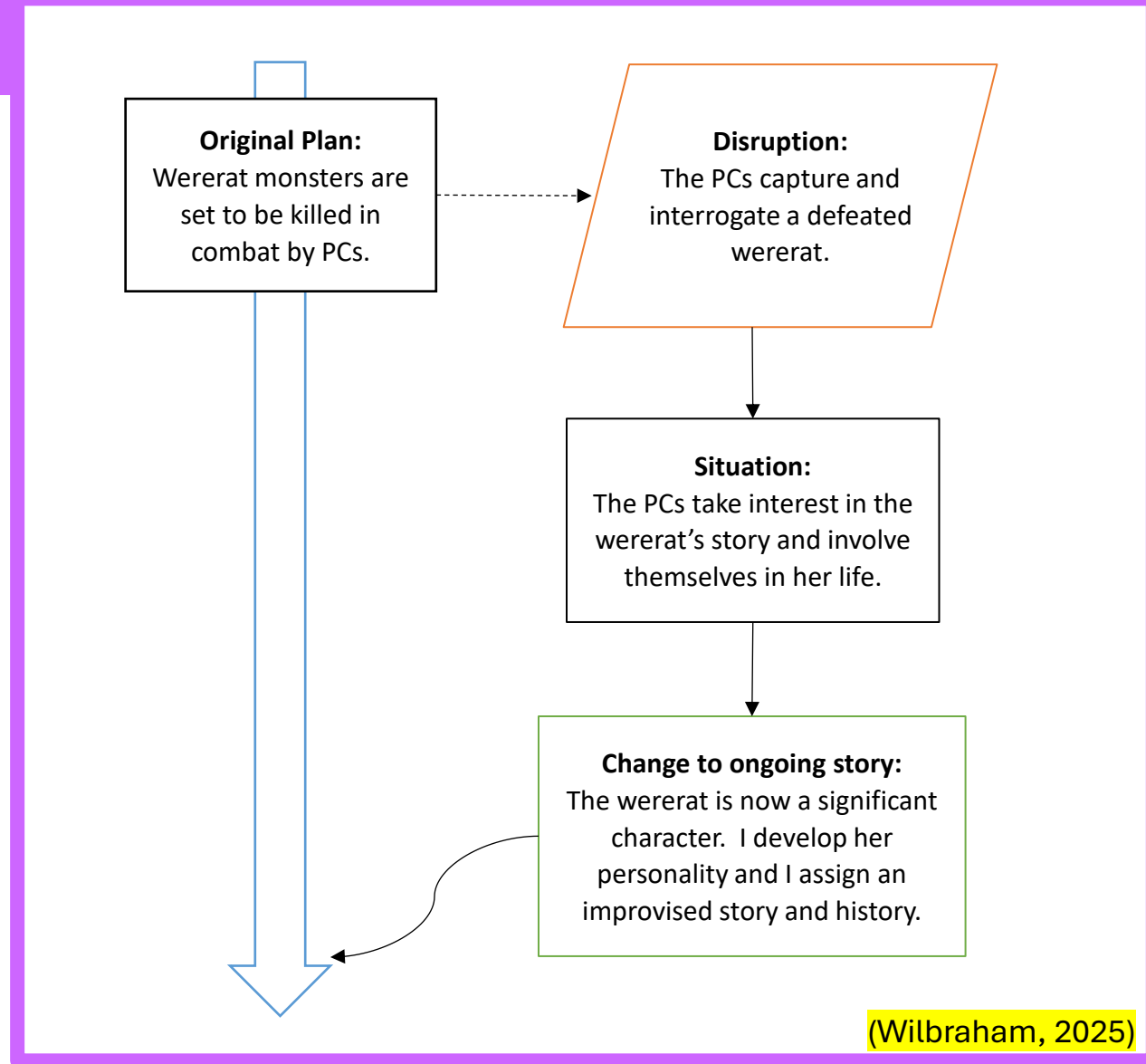


10

(Laws, 2002)

Participant Motivations

- Effective entertainment requires accounting for the desires and preferences of the participants, including the GM.
- Player typologies are useful as a lens through which a GM might consider player preferences.
- A GM may estimate player engagement with aspects of a game and adjust efforts to better entertain them, with various suggested methods for doing so.



THE ANTI-HERO
You are the badass that everyone loves. Whether you're sticking it to "the man" or telling it like it is, the audience identifies with your rejection of conformity. How do you keep your rebellion from going too far?

YOU START AND RESET TO AUDIENCE +1

HAILING FROM

- ★ Detroit, Michigan
- ★ Brooklyn, New York
- ★ Alligator, Mississippi
- ★ Elsewhere:

ENTRANCE

- ★ Loud & Flashy
- ★ Downhome & Gritty
- ★ Silent & Serious
- ★ Something Else:

Synthesizing Between Forms

STATS
You start with: Body -2, Luck 0, Power 0, Charisma -1, Work -1
Then add +1 to one stat of your choice.

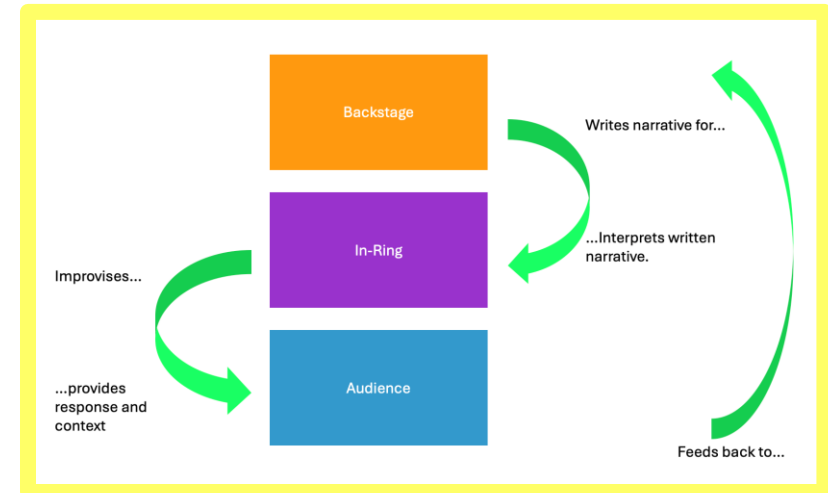
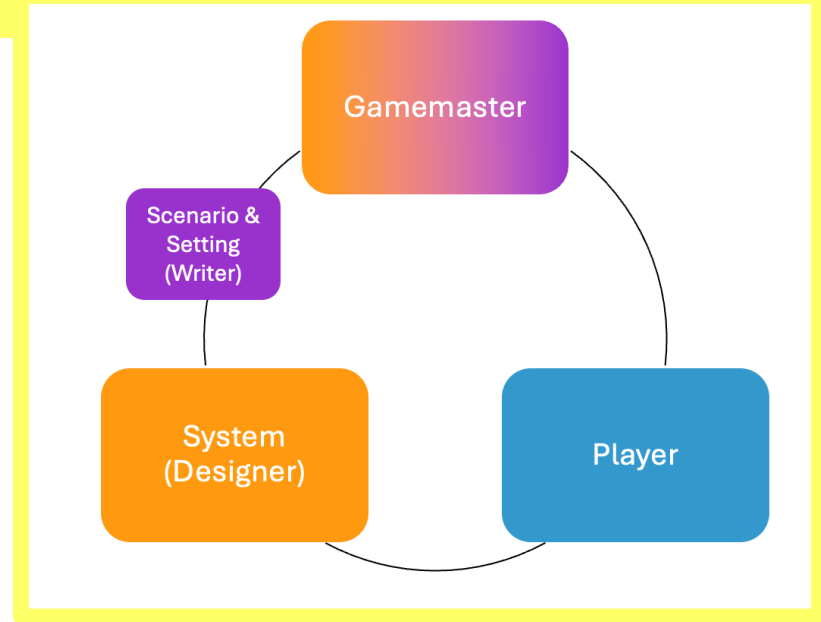
HEAT QUESTIONS

- ★ Who did I kick the shit out of to prove how tough I am?
- ★ With whom do I have a reluctant alliance against a mutual enemy?



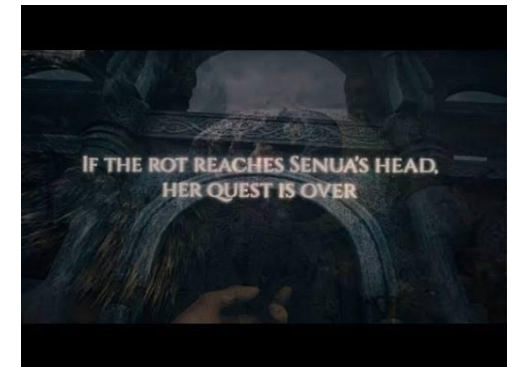
RPGs & Wrestling – Shared Features

- Both are experiences with game-like and storytelling elements, with a goal to create an emergent narrative.
- Complex co-creation of narrative occurs through the relationship between several parties.
 - Control over the ongoing narrative in principle rests with a key authoritative party.
 - The “Credibility” of actions that affect the narrative is fluid, and ultimately in service to entertainment.
 - The motivations of the parties differ and may change over time.



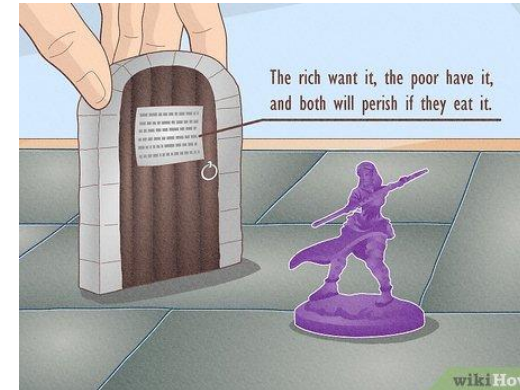
Framing Narrative with Competition

- Game-like competitive conceits primarily frame narrative.
- Actual challenge is not necessarily the priority.
- Fiction is structured such that we must return to the conflict resolution mechanisms.

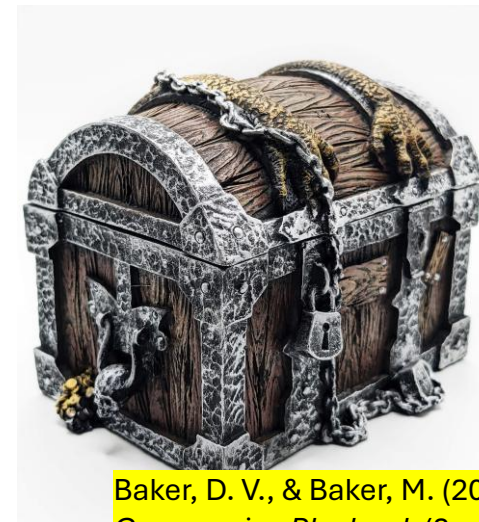


Performance and Challenge

- Proficient performance within any element is not necessarily the best way to entertain.



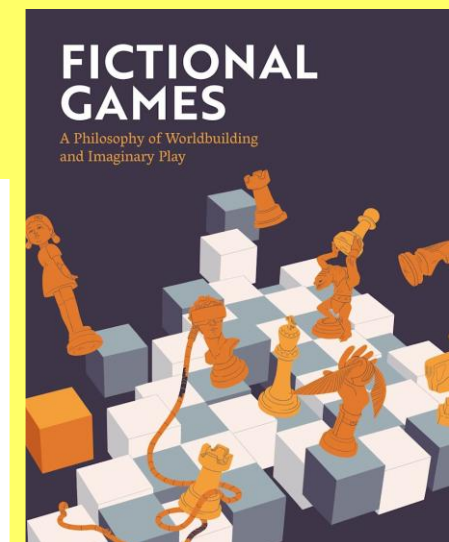
- “Be a fan of the characters.”



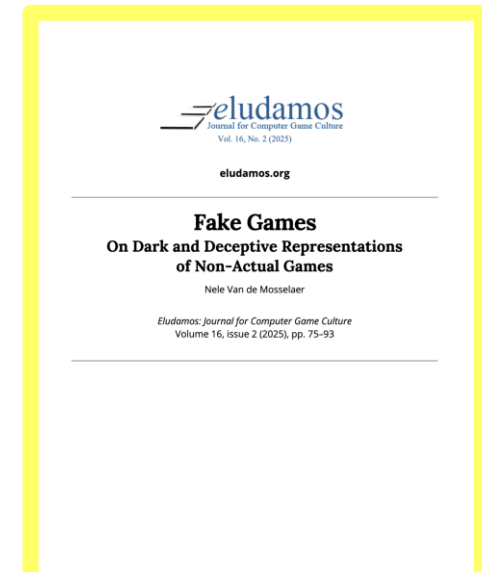
Baker, D. V., & Baker, M. (2016). *Apocalypse World: The Master of Ceremonies Playbook* (2nd edn). Lumpley Games.

Fake & Fictional Games

- Wrestling can be positioned within **Gualeni and Fassone's** theory of **fictional games**. As a set of rules, wrestling is intentionally incomplete in a way that allows for the productive structuration of narrative.
- See also, **Van De Moesseler's** concept of the **fake game**. While TTRPGs are indeed real in their mechanical completeness, the version enacted at the table will often diverge radically from the rules that are printed in the core book. Depending on the GM they may indeed be misleading their players about mechanical resolutions to produce entertaining scenarios.



Gualeni, S., & Fassone, R. (2022). *Fictional games: A philosophy of worldbuilding and imaginary play* (First edition). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350277113>



Van De Mosselaer, N. (2025). Fake games: On dark and deceptive representations of non-actual games. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 16(2), 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.7557/ejcg.c.v16i2.7965>

Entertainment at All Costs

- **Interactivity:** How does a designer respond to their player in a way that fulfils their intent and vision while also allowing for their player to co-create that experience?
- **Challenge:** While traditional quest structures are satisfying, the subversion of these structures is often where narrative growth comes from. How do we play with rote narrative structures productively?
- **Improvisation:** How can we structure player improvisation in a way that plays to the strength of the form while still allowing for a coherent narrative & play experience?

(Potential) Next Steps

- **What can we learn from fan communities as co-designers?** Continuing review of fan-produced content around wrestling.
- **What can we learn at the edges of wrestling design?** Interviews with people in design roles of amateur and indie wrestling promotions. Especially those which break dominant narratives established by mainstream pro-wrestling.
- **How can we expand this to other domains?** Consideration of other peripheral design practices: improv, theatre sports, and stage magic. Shonen?

Q&A + Contact Details

Thank you!

Dr. Tony Pellicone, Senior Lecturer in Design,
tony.pellicone@Falmouth.ac.uk

Dr. Ché Wilbraham, Lecturer in Design & Writing,
che.grant.Wilbraham@falmouth.ac.uk

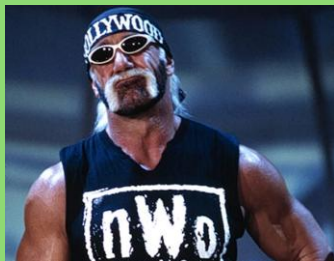
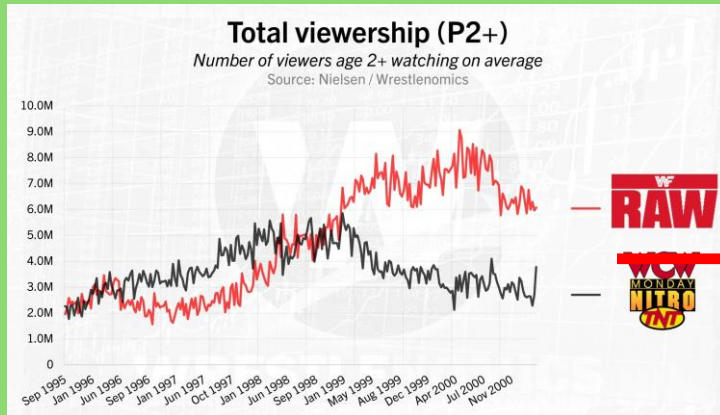


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Real Layer
(The business of the studio)

WCW



Kayfabe Layer
(The story in the ring)



On-Screen Action
(And subsequent fan response)



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Adaptation

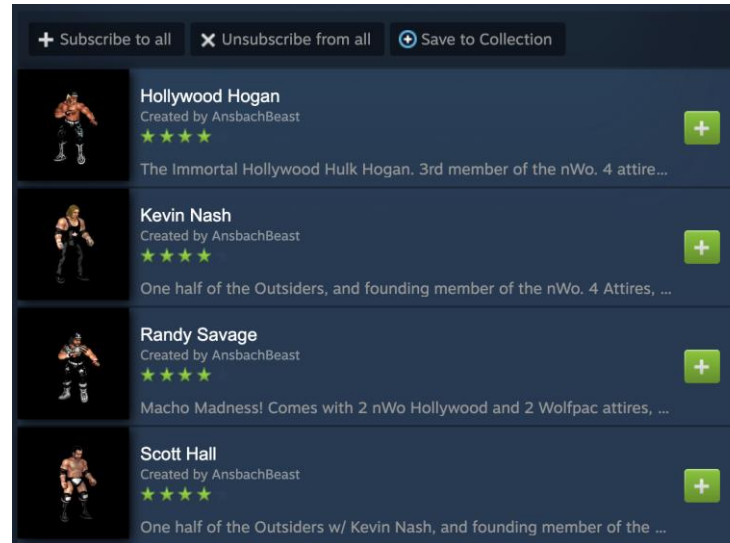
Ludification:



Makes matches real in-Kayfabe.
You actually are fighting within
the rules of the match. E.g.
official WWE games.

<https://wwe.2k.com/2k26/>

Dream Booking:



Allows for players to take on the
role of a writer and booker,
often with figures from wrestling
history. E.g. Firepro and
botmatch streams.

<https://firepro-w.com/>

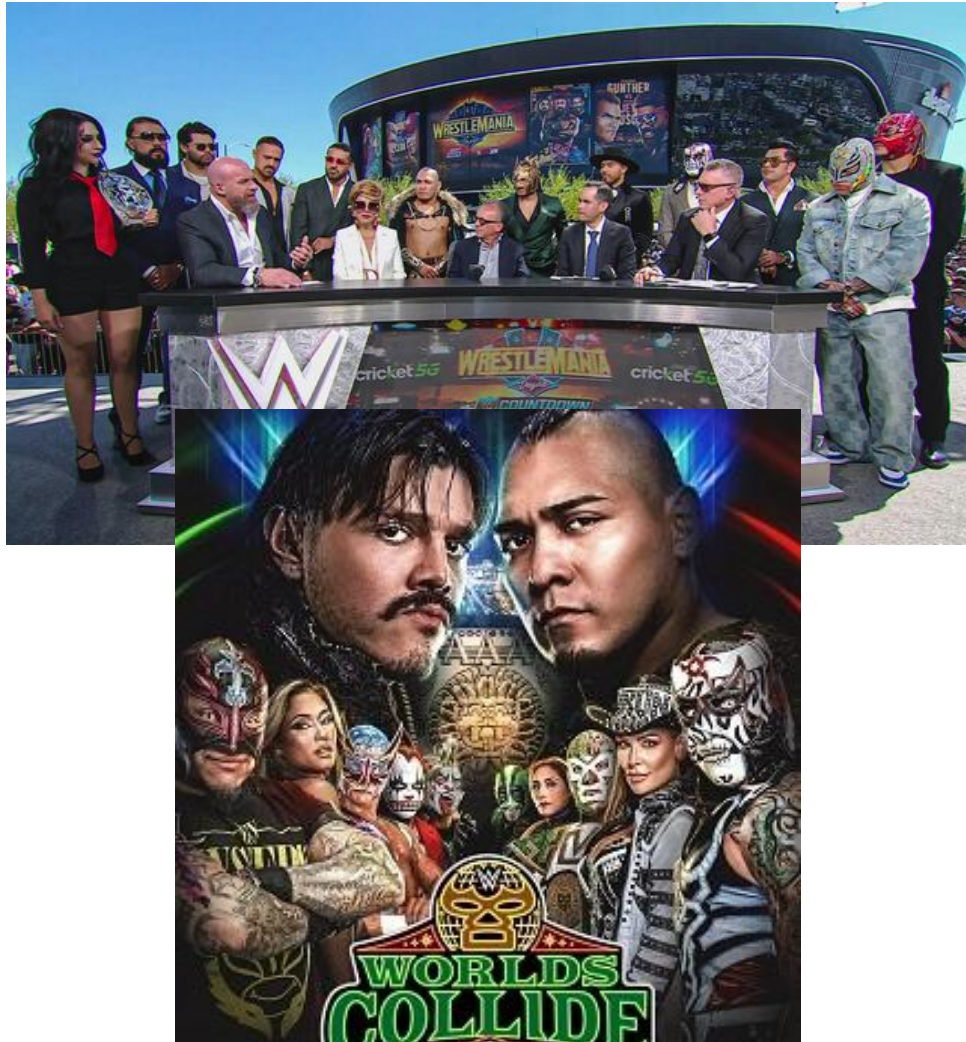
Expansion:



Imagines the logics and rules of
wrestling as applying to other
domains. This is, honestly,
mostly mdickie.

<https://mdickie.com/>

The Business

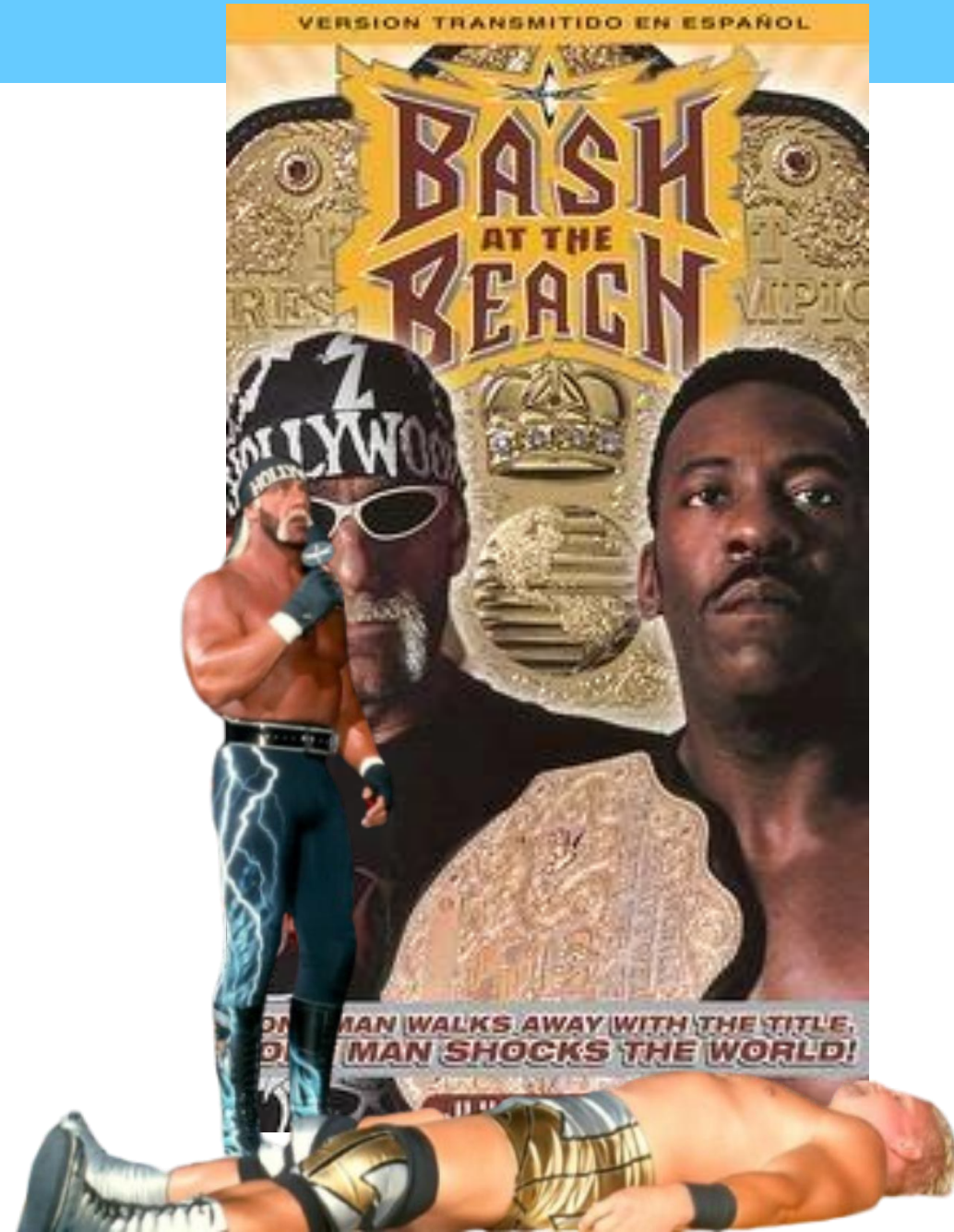


- Wrestling's origins come from using fictional framing as a marketing strategy, and a way to insure wrestler health.
- Promotions have historically competed over audience share, with the WWF and then WWE emerging as a dominant force.
- Often the changing trends and economic factors of wrestling are brought into the emergent storylines of a promotion.

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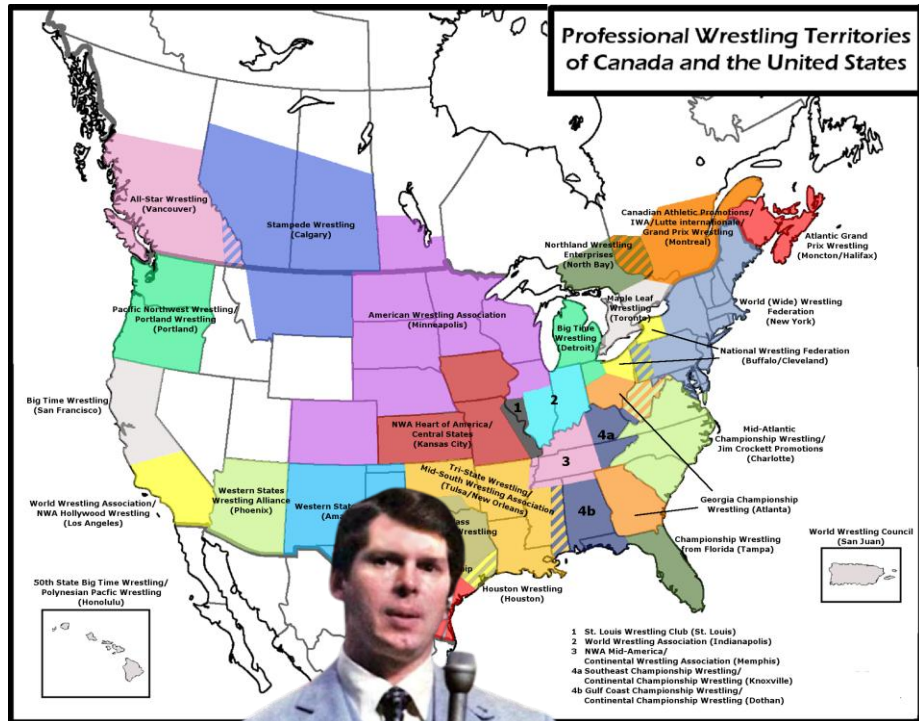
Audiences



- Audience interactivity and the wobbly nature of kayfabe are things that attract audiences to the show.
- While audiences carry many different motivations, the 'co-production' of a live event is a major draw between fans.

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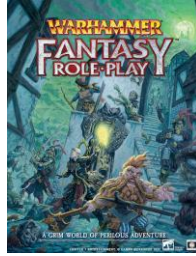


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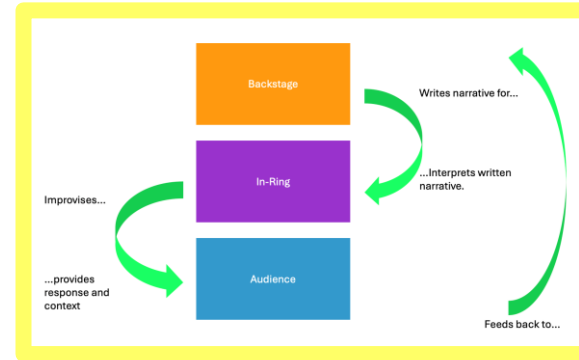
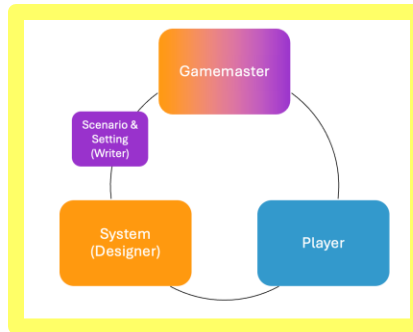
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Credibility, Power, and Entertainment

What establishes credibility?



Where does narrative power lie in any given moment?



Who are we designing for?

That's why I enjoy watching wrestling—you can cuss them out. They made an announcement earlier that we can't cuss while we're here. That won't hold up long. When they cuss at my boy, I really get mad as hell...I really like to hoot and holler and just carry on. It gives me a chance because I can't do that at home.

Wrestling takes an extreme amount of athleticism. A pro wrestler may be an actor, but it is still physical, and they are still thrown to the ground and hit with chairs. Even if it is fake, it hurts.

Ford, S. (2007). *Pinning down fan involvement: An examination of multiple modes of engagement for professional wrestling fans*. (Material of the MIT Programme in Comparative Media Studies). MIT.



Framing Narrative with Mechanics (other examples)

- Money in the Bank, etc. – adds drama
- RPGs often have everything use the same mechanic, often geared to combat
 - Counterexamples
- Structure fiction such that the conceit of competition is required
 - Crash Holly's 24/7 Hardcore defence
 - Grocery store
 - Right to Censor

Performance and Challenge (other examples)

- Hogan being shown up
- Spike Dudley – makes others look monstrous