

The Meta-Fan Era: Examining Kayfabe on UpUpDownDown's *Battle of the Brands*

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In June 2015, WWE's Xavier Woods launched the UpUpDownDown video game channel on YouTube. Battle of the Brands (BOTB), one of the series featured on the channel, develops its own storyworld kayfabe while rejecting some of the traditional rules associated with kayfabe of the WWE televised product. For example, superstars featured on the channel openly use wrestling terminology and discuss real-world relationships. This interplay between two different conceptualizations of kayfabe produces a series rife with intertextual and metatextual meaning for the audience. This paper explores how BOTB modifies our understanding of kayfabe by highlighting the viability of a storyworld specific approach to kayfabe.

Introduction

In 1989, Vince McMahon acknowledged in front of the New Jersey Senate that World Wrestling Entertainment (then known as World Wrestling Federation) should be considered “an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic context” (qtd. in Hoy-Browne). This acknowledgment changed the future of professional wrestling in the United States as WWE would transition from a wrestling company to a sports entertainment company. In making this transition, WWE would produce materials, both inside and outside of the televised diegetic world, that allowed consumers to peek behind the proverbial curtain of kayfabe.

However, the *Battle of the Brands (BOTB)* series launched in April 2018 for the YouTube channel UpUpDownDown represents a significant departure from previous WWE-affiliated programming that played with the concept of kayfabe. *BOTB* does not rely exclusively on the kayfabe narrative of the WWE televised product. WWE's televised programming, including *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT*, establishes how the audience should view the characters featured on television. Performers can be said to break kayfabe if their actions run counter to those expected by their characters or if their actions reveal the scripted nature of the professional wrestling business. However, UpUpDownDown complicates this dichotomous view of kayfabe.

Xavier Woods, in character as Austin Creed on *BOTB*, once described UpUpDownDown as a “kingdom [UpUpDownDown] within a kingdom [WWE]” (“Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference” 12:05-12:08). However, it may be more accurate to describe UpUpDownDown as kayfabe within kayfabe. UpUpDownDown has its own channel-specific kayfabe and storylines that have no impact on the narratives featured each week on the WWE televised product. *BOTB*, and UpUpDownDown as a whole, exist as a mostly independent storyworld that interacts with the kayfabe narrative of the televised product in thought-provoking ways. This article will explore *BOTB*’s unique position as a performer-led initiative that illustrates how a storyworld specific approach may help us understand the notion of kayfabe in the meta-fan (Shoemaker, “WWE SummerSlam”) era. *BOTB* rejects traditional ideas of kayfabe by openly discussing real-world relationships and freely using wrestling terminology but manages to maintain its program and channel-specific kayfabe.

This analysis examines the first two seasons of *BOTB* available on the UpUpDownDown YouTube channel. Both seasons feature former WWE superstar Tyler Breeze and current WWE superstar Xavier Woods competing in General Manager (GM) mode in the video game *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006* for PlayStation 2. GM mode is text-based as it requires the GMs, Tyler Breeze and Xavier Woods, to book the best possible show given the talent featured on their digital rosters. In-game fan allegiances to a particular brand, Raw or SmackDown, can change because of the GM’s booking acumen. The goal of GM mode is to end the season with more fans than your opponent. Although the seasons are different lengths, 66 episodes for season one and 37 episodes for season two, each episode features commentary from the GMs alongside guest appearances from other contracted talent. This case study relies on conversations between the GMs during the videos as well as the storylines and video promos developed to complement a text-based competition and fan remarks from the comment section below the videos. Quotations from the YouTube comment section will be attributed to commenters instead of including a username to preserve privacy.

“You know it’s fake, right?” Exploring WWE’s history with kayfabe

Like other fields of expertise, professional wrestling has its own specialized language that industry insiders use. Scholars argue that the primary purpose of this technical terminology is to obfuscate meaning to outsiders (See: Ford, “I was Stabbed”; Kerrick; Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*; Wrenn). George Kerrick once described wrestling jargon in the following way: “there are many other expressions associated with professional wrestling, but all seem to illustrate one point: the sport is handled from the inside so as to create a distance between the athletes and those who buy

their product” (145). David Shoemaker echoes Kerrick’s comments when he writes, “Every subculture has its lingo, but the subbier the culture, the more unintelligible the dialect can be. Couple that with an industry conceived on falsehood and dedicated to keeping the lie alive, and you’ve got a rabbit hole that even the most stalwart of linguists would think twice before exploring” (“Grantland Dictionary”). The primary goal of wrestling terminology is to separate those in the locker room from those in the audience. The unrestricted use of wrestling jargon on *BOTB* can be considered a rejection of this traditional separation between the audience and the performers. Even more noteworthy is that the use of these terms can be regarded as a rejection of kayfabe.

Of all the terms used in professional wrestling, kayfabe is arguably the most important to the wrestling tradition. So, what is kayfabe? Scholars interested in kayfabe have posited many definitions, including the “illusion of realness” (Smith 54), it “describes the diegetic world of professional wrestling as real” (Laine, “Professional Wrestling Scholarship” 90), and it “refers to the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life” (Litherland 531). What these and many other definitions have in common is a reference to the diegetic world of professional wrestling being distinct from the “real world” that surrounds it.

Walus and Wilcox propose that the acceptance of in-ring kayfabe, which they define as a “fictional storyline,” is limited mainly to younger audiences. In contrast, older audiences are more interested in understanding what is commonly called the “shoot’ (unscripted, nonfiction reality)” (28). This dialectical tension between kayfabe and shoot, or fiction and reality, has enticed fans for a long time. Sharon Mazer describes this tension in the following way: “the pleasure for wrestlers and spectators alike may be found in the expressive tension between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, in the anticipation of, and acute desire for, the moment where the real breaks through the pretended” (68). Although fans want to peek behind the curtain, or perhaps see through the curtain of kayfabe, they also want to be afforded opportunities to “mark out.” “Marking out” is defined by Sam Ford as “expressing the genuine emotion associated with fully immersing themselves in the role of the ‘believing-sports fan”’ (“The Marks Have” 123). Marking out has been examined as one of the pleasures associated with watching wrestling as it allows all fans to have an emotional response to the storylines regardless of their industry knowledge (Koh; Wrenn). Thus, kayfabe represents a reality parallel to the “real world” where gimmicks run rampant, feats of unbelievable athleticism and strength are commonplace, and evil authority figures are always waiting in the wings. Fans understand that in this reality, “matches can be predetermined and fictional yet feel completely real” (Reinhard 31).

Kayfabe long served as one of the guiding principles for the WWE product. Materials produced by WWE in the early 1990s, including the popular *WWF Magazine*, primarily adhered to the kayfabe of the televised product. These kayfabe-dependent materials can be classified as paratexts. Research on paratexts is indebted to literary scholar Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality. Genette describes transtextuality as "everything that brings it [a text] into relationship with other texts" (81). Genette accounts for several relationships: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality. A translation of Genette's work on paratexts by Marie Maclean posits that a "text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions ... like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations" (261). While Genette's work focuses on books, an expansion of Genette's work by Jonathan Gray proposes that "paratexts are all those things that surround a work, dependently attached to it, yet aren't part of the work itself" (33). Early products like *WWF Magazine* provided additional perspectives on wrestlers, but features in this magazine depended on the kayfabe narrative established during the WWE televised programming.

Although Vince McMahon acknowledged that the matches were scripted entertainment, the company remained reluctant to altogether dispense with the notion of kayfabe in the early 1990s. However, just a few years later in 1996, WWE introduced *RAW Magazine*, which provided profiles on the real lives of WWE performers. In a 1997 address to usher in the Attitude Era, Vince McMahon stated, "We in the WWF think that you, the audience, are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted" ("Mr. McMahon Ushers" 0:48-0:54). According to Dru Jeffries, this address served the following functions: to broaden the appeal of WWE programming by comparing it to their popular contemporaries and highlight the scripted component of WWE programming (4-5).

Jeffries argues that the expansion of WWE's media portfolio since 1999 "exploded the concept of kayfabe, creating multiple overlapping storyworlds, each of which bears its own unique relationship to the main storyworld" (2). If the televised product serves as the main storyworld, then WWE's transformation into a media conglomerate has resulted in a complex web of meaning where different mediated products may perform paratextual, intertextual, metatextual, architextual, and hypertextual functions. Consider WWE's foray into reality television, which has been a particularly fruitful enterprise, as shows like *Tough Enough* and *Legends Roundtables* were staples on TV and the WWE Network. *Tough Enough* allowed fans to learn more about the intensive training process for aspiring WWE superstars while simultaneously serving as intertextual and paratextual information for the appearances by contestants and winners on WWE programming. Consider Maven's

2002 Royal Rumble appearance, where both his chyron and the commentators referenced him as the male winner of season one of *Tough Enough*. If an individual watched *Tough Enough* before watching the weekly scripted product, then *Tough Enough* would serve as a paratext as it provides the audience with orienting information about the wrestling industry and WWE. However, the references to Maven's history on *Tough Enough* would constitute intertextual information as intertextuality is defined as "the literal presence (more or less literal, whether integral or not) of one text within another" (Genette, *The Architext* 82). WWE's creative approach to storytelling can be seen in the brief Reality Era that featured storylines like Daniel Bryan vs. The Authority (Norman; see also: Canella; Jansen; Koh, "It's What's Best for Business"; Laine, "Stadium-sized Theatre"; Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*), which obscured the difference between the behind-the-scenes machinations responsible for the WWE televised product and the actual on-air product.

Importantly, kayfabe is frequently discussed as a singular construct. In WWE's case, their kayfabe is dependent on the narratives featured on weekly *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT* episodes. These weekly shows and premium live events (formerly known as pay-per-views) let the audience know which performers are the "faces" (good characters) and "heels" (evil characters). This notion of kayfabe being linked to the televised product has become untenable in an era of expansive storyworlds and social media. The brilliance in *BOTB* is in illustrating what the audience considers real is no longer just promotion contingent but is also storyworld contingent. Each additional storyworld crafted can connect with the televised storyworld in various ways. Jan-Noël Thon proposes three relationships between storyworlds of the same transmedia franchise: redundancy, expansion, and modification (379). Briefly, redundancy refers to addressing the same storyline elements present in other words, expansion refers to the addition of novel aspects to the storyworld, and finally, modification refers to additions that are incompatible with our previous knowledge of the transmedia franchise (Thon 379). *BOTB*'s storyworld would fall under the umbrella of modifications as the storyline elements, and character names are largely incompatible with the world of the televised product.

Reinventing the Konami Code: The birth of UpUpDownDown

UpUpDownDown is a YouTube channel with over two million subscribers. Despite this success, a video game channel was not the original plan for WWE superstar Xavier Woods. Xavier Woods, one-third of the wrestling stable The New Day, approached WWE with the idea of producing a travel show for WWE Network that would highlight the different cities visited by superstars as they were on the road

(Fudge). When WWE rejected this proposal, Woods returned to the drawing board resulting in the idea for a channel where WWE superstars play video games (Fudge). Former WWE superstar Zack Ryder, the creator of kayfabe-breaking series *Z! True Long Island Story*, talked with Xavier Woods and Matt Hardy about their use of social media branding on the show *Table for 3*. *Table for 3* is a WWE network exclusive that features current and previously contracted talent discussing their experiences in the wrestling industry. In the episode entitled “Gone Viral,” Zack Ryder admitted to Xavier Woods, “When you first told me this idea, I was like this is crazy. But now look, it’s huge” (“Gone Viral” 17:05-17:11). Xavier Woods credits Zack Ryder “for bearing the cross” (“Gone Viral” 17:14-17:16) when it comes to YouTube endeavors, which may have made the establishment of the UpUpDownDown channel just a bit easier. The presence of a precedent in *Z! True Long Island Story* did not eliminate the difficulty of the negotiation process, as Woods stated that wrestling is “one of those industries that people have a lot of questions about, and we never really want to ruin the magic, we want people to still have their child-like awe when they see the show” (Fudge). Ultimately, WWE acquiesced, and Woods launched UpUpDownDown in June 2015.

From the outset, it was clear that UpUpDownDown would represent a departure from previous content associated with the WWE. UpUpDownDown is a gaming channel that features prominent WWE personalities cooperating and competing in an eclectic list of video game titles. During these gameplay sessions, superstars often reflect on their experiences inside and outside the ring. Gaming channels like UpUpDownDown have surged in popularity, with YouTube reporting that 100 billion hours of gaming content were watched in 2020 (Park). In the introduction video to the channel, Woods states, “Hello to the gamers, geeks, cosplayers, chiptune enthusiasts, nerds, one and all. I am Austin Creed, aka Xavier Woods, and I would like to welcome you to UpUpDownDown (“Welcome to UpUpDownDown” 0:00-0:14). This introduction is noteworthy because Xavier Woods introduces the alias Austin Creed. Most wrestlers that appear on the channel adopt nicknames to demarcate these appearances from the kayfabe of the televised product. The selected nicknames are occasionally intertextual references to their wrestling characters, with the “Phenomenal” AJ Styles nickname being the “Prince of Phenomenal” and The Miz using “Moneymaker” as a callback to a previous catchphrase. However, other nicknames emerge from interactions on the channel, such as Kofi Kingston adopting the moniker “Mr. 24/7” after defeating Woods in a game of *Madden* by a score of 24 to 7. For most nicknames, consider Becky Lynch’s nickname of “Soulless Senpai,” it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between the alias and their WWE character or the real-world performer. In addressing the

audience of his new channel, Woods averred, “Now, some of you may know me as the guy who incessantly claps his hands and forces positivity on people. I’m sorry. I really am sorry about that, but this is going to be an entirely different experience” (“Welcome to UpUpDownDown” 0:53-1:05). From its inception, the channel was designed to appeal to a broad swath of individuals regardless of their familiarity with the current televised WWE product.

Competing for General Manager supremacy: An overview of *Battle of the Brands*

In April 2018, nearly three years after the debut of UpUpDownDown, *BOTB* was launched. *BOTB* represented a partnership between WWE superstar Xavier Woods and former WWE superstar Tyler Breeze. It is important to note that gameplay discussions on *BOTB* will use the names Austin Creed for Xavier Woods and Prince Pretty for Tyler Breeze.

In *BOTB*, Prince Pretty serves as the general manager (GM) for Raw, and Austin Creed serves as the general manager of SmackDown in *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006*. As GM, the superstars have several responsibilities, including drafting their talent, managing superstar contracts, and booking all matches and promo segments for their respective brands. While *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006* marked the first WWE video game to feature a GM mode, fan-driven fantasy wrestling leagues initially were conducted through the mail in the 1980s before becoming more widely accessible online in the 1990s (Potter). To begin every fantasy season of GM mode, the game divides ten million fans evenly between the two GMs. While both GMs start with an allotment of five million fans, fan allegiances may change weekly due to effective or ineffective booking decisions. The GM with the most fans after WrestleMania receives the GM of the Year award.

Only the first two seasons of *BOTB* will be featured in this analysis. There are two notable differences between seasons one and two of *BOTB*. Season one of *BOTB* primarily emphasized the real-life friendship of Austin Creed and Prince Pretty as they competed for bragging rights and to avoid a punishment meted out to the loser. Season two of *BOTB* featured real-world performers cutting promos for their digital counterparts. In addition to these character promos, season two introduced an overarching narrative connected to the UpUpDownDown title. *BOTB*’s second season can be considered a drillable text (Ford, “WWE’s Storyworld”; Mittell). A drillable text encourages the audience to “dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling” (Mittell). Audiences can explore multiple layers of meaning in the two separate but concurrent storylines featured in season two of *BOTB*: the in-game diegetic storylines as told by real-world performers and Austin Creed’s attempt to demonstrate GM supremacy against the usurper of

the UpUpDownDown title in Prince Pretty. A WWE superstar wins the UpUpDownDown title if they can defeat the current champion in a game chosen by the GM of the channel, Austin Creed. Prince Pretty defeated Miss Bliss (WWE superstar Alexa Bliss) mere minutes after she won the title, setting the stage for the longest championship reign in UpUpDownDown history. While these championship challenges are part of a different series featured on UpUpDownDown, Prince Pretty's heel turn (transitioning from a good to bad character) was an essential part of the channel's kayfabe and represented a key theme during season two of *BOTB*.

Marks No More: How *BOTB* Speaks Directly to its Audience

Discussions of booking were once reserved for kayfabe-breaking moments, such as Triple H's infamous "Who booked this crap?" sign (qtd. in Bills), but *BOTB* dispenses with this sense of formality as the performers openly use wrestling terminology and discuss booking decisions. Ford ("I was Stabbed") argued that wrestling terminology can be classified as an "argot to shield the wrestling business from outsiders." This language was created to conceal the reality that professional wrestling was, in fact, the professional wrestling business. Throughout *BOTB*, performers do not shy away from using this secret language even if the use runs contrary to the televised kayfabe of WWE.

There are many conversations on *BOTB* connected to the subject of booking. Shoemaker ("Grantland Dictionary") defines booking as "planning the storylines and match outcomes." In fact, the title of this article is inspired by one of those discussions regarding booking. Prince Pretty, in a discussion about interactions between wrestlers of different generations, stated:

You know how you have like eras? The Attitude Era? And then it was whatever came after that? Ruthless Aggression? And all that stuff? We're in like The Fan Era. Where literally like every week, it's like, "Alright, you guys are going to dress like DX because they were cool. And then do your stuff." And then like, "Alright, you guys are going to dress up like this other person that wrestled thirty years ago. ("Battle of the Brands #55" 7:30-7:51)

Prince Pretty opines it would have been unimaginable for Stone Cold Steve Austin to dress up as Macho Man, whereas the current generation of superstars is like, "Hell Yeah! Hit Austin's music. I'm going to put this bald cap on" ("Battle of the Brands #55" 8:04-8:09). While the concept of the fan era is intriguing, it would be more accurate to argue that wrestling is in the meta-fan era. According to Shoemaker, meta-fans are "the contingent of mostly older wrestling viewers for whom history and reality matter as much as the onscreen narrative" ("WWE SummerSlam"). Meta-fans are always interested in discussing the reality of the

wrestling industry. The GMs on the channel, Prince Pretty and Austin Creed, show as much interest in discussing the industry as non-industry-connected meta-fans.

For current WWE superstars, their booking becomes a veritable struggle between developing the future and honoring the past. As Prince Pretty mentioned, the booking may require a superstar to don an outfit that references a legend from decades ago. While the performer may be excited at the chance to cosplay as their favorite superstar essentially, this limits their opportunity to develop their unique brand apart from reenactments. Furthermore, booking may lead to segments, likely at a *WrestleMania* or anniversary event, where famous stars from bygone eras destroy modern-day heels. For example, consider the destruction of The Revival, now known as FTR in AEW, by D-Generation X and The New World Order on the 25th anniversary of *Monday Night Raw*. AEW's Dax Harwood (known in WWE as Scott Dawson) spoke with Jim Cornette about his frustration with the booking:

We [referencing AEW's Cash Wheeler] came to the back and I walked right through gorilla and I punched the wall. It was a brick wall and punched it as hard as I could and I started flipping out.... I was in tears not because I was sad but that I was so upset and because a guy [Triple H] that we had, and we still do, a guy that we had so much respect for, we couldn't believe that he would allow that to happen to us. (qtd. in Ravens)

This deference to previous eras leads Tyler Breeze to imagine a scenario where he finally gets an opportunity that is secondary to an eighty-year-old Batista. Prince Pretty is far from the only performer to discuss or allude to booking during *BOTB*. Austin Creed, in explaining his motivations for developing season two of *BOTB*, states:

Let's do season two. And we will put all our friends in there. People who we think should be on TV a little bit more. Let's give them an outlet. Let's make sure people have a safe haven if there's things they want to talk about that they don't get to talk about on TV or characters they want to try out, things they want to explore that they don't get the opportunity to explore. Let's give them this platform. ("Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference" 1:03-1:19)

Creed's language is certainly not incendiary, but it can be viewed as a gentle criticism of WWE booking. Creed's remark about the impetus for character promos and significant portions of season two of *BOTB* can be classified as examples of metatextuality. Genette's idea of metatextuality has been defined as "the transtextual text that links a commentary to the text it comments on" (*The Architext* 82). It is exceedingly rare for a WWE-approved series to imply criticism of the current product.

Another comment proffered by Creed in season two is rich with potential interpretations:

You only put your money into your top guys, and that's what is wrong with your show. More fans would want to connect with your show if you quit investing all of your three hours into only three different people. When we got a full locker room full of people that can go. They can talk, but if you want to sit here, as the person in charge, just wasting all of their time. Wasting their prime, their physical activity, then you can be like that. ("Battle of the Brands S2E12" 21:05-21:33)

In context, the comments made by Austin Creed can be classified as gloating after Creed won 30,000 fans for his brand, SmackDown. However, fans quickly saw the potential latent meaning in Creed's comments. One commenter wrote: "You put all of your money and resources into your top 3 guys while you have a locker room FULL of talent that you aren't using' I can't imagine a wrestling (Ahem, sports entertainment) company doing such a thing." Another commenter remarked, "That line about using three hours on three guys feels like that could be read into, but as a denizen of the internets, Mr Woods would know this. Either way; well played sir." There are certainly moments, especially in *BOTB*'s second season, where the line between kayfabe comments for *BOTB* and implied criticism of booking on the WWE televised product is blurry.

Discussions of booking were not restricted to the superstars, as fans of the series would frequently discuss booking of both the televised product and the in-game shows in the comment section. Many fans enjoyed Prince Pretty's booking during season one of *BOTB*. One comment read, "Breezy needs to book Raw and Smackdown for real" ("SmackDown vs. Raw 2006 - Battle of the Brands #3"). Another commenter declared, "If Raw was anything in rl [real life] like Breezy books it I'd watch it like nobody's business. #ImaTylerBreezeguy" ("Battle of the Brands #9"). A common refrain found across *BOTB* videos is dissatisfaction with the current product featured on television. One comment even managed to simultaneously criticize the booking of a defunct company while arraigning the in-game booking of Austin Creed: "Last week Creed ran out of cash but this week he still does a bunch of gimmick matches.... This GM mode is more like Breeze is WWE and Creed is WCW" ("Battle of the Brands #34"). The comment section allows fans to react to the show while simultaneously demonstrating their knowledge of the wrestling industry. This knowledge is not limited to the WWE televised product, as evidenced above, but represents the meta-fans consistent seeking and acquiring more information about the wrestling industry.

Beyond booking discussions, other moments feature terminology typically associated with the wrestling locker room. Some *BOTB* episodes were recorded backstage at premium live events when Xavier Woods and Tyler Breeze competed on different brands. For example, episode twenty-nine of season one was recorded backstage at the *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view in 2018. During the Carmella vs. Asuka match for the SmackDown Women's Championship, James Ellsworth returned to help Carmella as he had previously served as her manager. In discussing this return, the general managers had the following conversation:

Austin Creed: What? Bro, Ellsworth came back?

Prince Pretty: Smellsworth is back.

Austin Creed: That's awesome. I had no idea. What was the finish?

Prince Pretty: She [Asuka] was beating up Carmella. Smellsworth dressed up like Asuka. And then Asuka is like staring at her. He pulls off the thing and does the big "Hey, it's me." Superkick, 1-2-3.

Austin Creed: I love it. ("Battle of the Brands #29" 8:06-8:28)

One commenter's surprise at this exchange was evident. "I like that they actually don't know their fellow wrestler's storylines. They must be kept on the down-low when it comes to surprises more than I thought." This fan fashioned themselves as knowledgeable about the industry, but this interaction befuddled them. In response to this apparent discovery, another commenter remarked, "Or, maybe they know parts of it but would rather keep it to themselves possibly?" These fans are unsure if they are witnessing the genuine reactions from the GMs or if they are heeding WWE's kayfabe or the kayfabe of *BOTB*. Laine argues "that even as you try to break through the web of kayfabe, you are still probably being duped one way or another" ("Professional Wrestling Scholarship" 90). This applies to an environment where kayfabe is no longer just a company-directed mandate. If performers have the flexibility and capability to create their own kayfabe and narratives, completely breaking through the web of kayfabe becomes an arduous task. However, these distinct conceptualizations of kayfabe provide meta-fans with new avenues to derive meaning from analyzing the wrestling industry.

One final example from season two demonstrates awareness regarding the use of wrestling terminology throughout the program:

Austin Creed: How are you feeling going into your blowoff show? Let's just use all the vocab. All the lingo.

Prince Pretty: Kayfabe. Kayfabe.

Austin Creed and Prince Pretty [Laugh] ("Battle of the Brands S2E33" 0:38-0:46).

While both GMs laugh about their use of specialized terminology in this conversation, the use of jargon is normalized across the episodes. This openness in discussing booking decisions and wrestling terminology would have been unimaginable thirty years ago. However, the internet has increased audience awareness about the intricacies of the wrestling industry, so it makes sense to treat the audience as an equal. *BOTB* certainly does not insult the intelligence of its audience and instead welcomes the viewer into the locker room with open arms.

No Longer an Illusion: Real-World Relationships on UpUpDownDown

During the initial creation process of the show, Xavier Woods staunchly advocated for the wrestlers to appear out of character. In an interview with *The Esports Observer* (Fudge), Woods declared, “And from my end I really wanted to make sure that everyone was able to be their genuine selves in this space, so we don’t have to worry about good and bad guys, and what happened last week on RAW, SmackDown, and NXT. Someplace where we can all enjoy video games and talk about our experiences with them and just have fun.” *BOTB*, and UpUpDownDown as a whole, provide a glimpse into the real-world relationships between performers in the locker room.

Consideration of real-world relationships should begin with the GMs of *BOTB* in Prince Pretty and Austin Creed. In describing the creation of UpUpDownDown in the channel’s kayfabe, Creed asserts:

I’ve actually built this kingdom [UpUpDownDown] within a kingdom [WWE], and then someone who I thought was my good friend, one of my best friends that I’ve ever had in my life comes in, and I say, “Hey, you want to play this game with me? You want to be on the channel a little bit?” What does he do? He completely comes in and takes my kindness and uses it against me. (“Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference” 12:05-12:22)

While the channel’s kayfabe will be explored later in the article, the rapport between the real-life friends is one of the driving forces behind the success of *BOTB* and UpUpDownDown as a whole.

As they book their shows, Austin Creed and Prince Pretty may provide information about the real person behind a character, especially if the GMs are booking them in an objectionable storyline. For example, season one of *BOTB* featured Austin Creed booking an angle where Scotty 2 Hotty was feuding with female superstars. In explaining the storyline, Creed declared, “The angle is that he’s just a misogynistic evil guy and so the ladies are coming after him now” (“Battle of the Brands #14” 13:56-14:03). Immediately following a description of this angle, Creed spoke directly to the audience, “In real-life Scotty 2 Hotty: fantastic human, fantastic

human. This is just fiction. This is for play play” (“Battle of the Brands #14” 14:10-14:16). While this disclaimer may not be needed, it illustrates the friendships between performers and trainers backstage. Weekly television narratives attempt to sell the audience on character alignment being the determining factor for diegetic alliances. Still, discussions of real-world characteristics reveal information about the performers behind our favorite characters.

In another episode, Prince Pretty entices The Hurricane to jump brands from SmackDown to Raw. *SmackDown! Vs. Raw 2006* allows GMs to steal superstars from the opposing brand, which has a deleterious effect on the booked show. If the GM that books their show second steals a superstar from the first GM’s completely booked show, then the entire match that the wrestler was involved in disappears. In season one, episode twenty-eight of *BOTB*, Austin Creed books a match featuring The Hurricane, managed by Khosrow Daivari, vs. Danny Basham, managed by Doug Basham. Instead of simply moving Daivari from a managerial role to a wrestler role, the game lists the match as vacant. In responding to The Hurricane’s defection, Creed averred:

The only person upset [the game allows GMs to see the morale of their wrestlers] in that match was Hurricane. So, Hurricane’s gone. That’s fine. So that hot Basham-Daivari rivalry isn’t going strong anymore. Oh no. Now I don’t have a match two. I’ll lose a couple of fans. Bye Hurricane. I like you in real life. In this, you were giving me NOTHING. (“Battle of the Brands #28” 12:14-12:32)

Finally, let’s return to the stated impetus for season two of *BOTB*: to give screen time to their friends. *BOTB*’s second season features promos from various performers, including Xavier Woods’s New Day brethren in Kofi Kingston and Big E, Tyler Breeze’s LeftRightLeftRight associates in Adam Cole, Cesaro, Drew Gulak, Drake Maverick, Jimmy Uso, Chad Gable, and Zelina Vega. The previous list doesn’t account for the performers who watched the booking of shows or appeared on other UpUpDownDown series. These appearances represent a stark contrast to legendary manager Jim Cornette’s description of kayfabe in the early days of professional wrestling: “A wrestler lived his ‘gimmick’—his character—twenty-four hours a day” (Cornette and Easton 6). On *BOTB*, performers no longer live their televised gimmicks as they frequently discuss their real-world friendships. Moreover, these guest appearances may require performers to play different characters from those featured on weekly television. *BOTB* rejects the televised kayfabe of WWE by featuring performers ignoring their on-screen personas while simultaneously developing a new kayfabe based on the characters and promos created for season two of *BOTB*.

Time travel in *BOTB*?: Examining the use of “portals” in *BOTB*’s second season

Thus far, we have explored how *BOTB* takes viewers behind the scenes of their favorite shows. The performers openly use the language associated with their profession and discuss their real-world relationships. It would seem as if the notion of kayfabe does not apply to the *BOTB* universe. However, *BOTB* represents a delicate balancing act between some elements of WWE kayfabe and its own channel-specific kayfabe.

The tenuous nature of this balancing was unmistakable in *BOTB*’s second season. As stated earlier, season two featured created characters based on the real-world contracted talent of the WWE. According to Austin Creed, the logic behind creating these characters was, “If we can’t see them a bunch on TV in real life, well this is still real life, in wrestle life over here. Why don’t we see them in wrestle life over here?” (“Battle of the Brands S2E3” 2:42-2:51) In this statement, Creed distinguishes between WWE’s weekly televised programming and their digital WWE within *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006*. Perhaps their digital WWE, which featured talent recording promos for their digital counterparts, would allow these performers to showcase different aspects of their personalities and promo abilities. These created characters represented a significant departure from the first season of *BOTB*, which only used wrestlers from the 2005 WWE roster. One of the dangers with using current performers, as opposed to wrestlers from fifteen years ago, is that their employment status can change at any moment. This section explores how *BOTB* navigated a spate of releases in April 2020.

On April 15, 2020, WWE released more than twenty active wrestlers (Casey). Some of the released wrestlers, including EC3, Aiden English, No Way Jose, and Drake Maverick were characters from the in-game storyworld on season two of *BOTB*. Drake Maverick was an integral component of the SmackDown roster as he served as World Heavyweight Champion and developed a rivalry with Drew Gulak’s digital counterpart that resulted in a loser gets circumcised match. While the matches between the two performers only happened in the video game, the real-life promos between Drake and Drew were fan favorites. These releases resulted in both GMs needing to reshuffle their booking plans in the digital world as they dealt with the releases of their friends in the real world.

During a recording of season two, episode seventeen of *BOTB*, Austin Creed provides the following explanation of the recording process:

Ladies and Gentlemen, so you understand, we tried to start doing this at 11 a.m. It’s now 4 p.m. The thing that happened is when we are playing a game that is set in a universe such as this. When we have gone back in time and

certain people have gone through this portal, and certain people stayed on the other side of the portal. There are certain situations where people on the 2006 side of the universe end up going back through the portal to present day. And people from present day end up waking up in the 2006 era. So, from time to time, that occurs in this universe because clearly, those are the rules. So, with that said, you are going to see some new people. And some people are going to be gone because they are back in the present day with us right now. (“Battle of the Brands S2E17” 03:09-03:51)

To explain the missing superstars, the general managers introduce the concept of a time portal. As they are playing a game set in 2006, modern-day performers must have traveled through a portal to participate in this digital version of WWE programming. This explanation provides insight into how performers on the 2021 roster are facing off with the legends from the 2006 roster. While time travel is not typically featured in WWE programming, the term portal refers to released superstars without using the term released. The portal concept was even worked into the feud between Aiden English and Cesaro. Creed provided the following explanation for Aiden English’s disappearance in a portal:

Aiden English is the only one who went through the portal on purpose. He said, “You know what? I’ve been whipping Cesaro’s ass. For weeks we have gone back and forth, but you know who else wants a little piece? You know who else wants a little piece that’s been sitting at the commentator’s table? That knows how to get it done in the ring?” He went and tagged in his partner Corey Graves. (“Battle of the Brands S2E17” 18:33-18:55)

This explanation simultaneously explains Aiden English’s departure while building the foundation for a rivalry between the newly acquired Corey Graves and Cesaro.

During this episode, one wrestler who was “portaled” back to 2006 was Michael McGillicutty. For those unfamiliar, Michael McGillicutty was the name used in *NXT* for WWE superstar Curtis Axel. Unfortunately, Michael McGillicutty was released on April 30, 2020, two weeks after the releases on April 15. This delayed release resulted in the discussion of “another dimensional time change” (“Battle of the Brands S2E18” 14:34-14:35) during the very next *BOTB* episode when Apollo Crews replaces Michael McGillicutty in this fictional universe. One astute commenter addressed the issue of releases while using the language associated with *BOTB* kayfabe, “I know it’s years off, but I’m gonna guess that if there is a season three, it’ll be using Golden Age and New Generation wrestlers. Less of a risk that they’ll vanish down the time portal.” According to a poll available on WWE.com (“What is your Favorite WWE Era?”), the Golden Age corresponds to the period from the 1980s to the early 1990s, whereas the New Generation refers to the period

from the early to mid-1990s. As the wrestlers from the previously listed periods are likely to be retired, there is little concern that changes in their employment status will require the GMs to change their in-game rosters.

The previously referenced episodes are not the only times that portal is used in season two of *BOTB*. During a livestream of the in-game SummerSlam, season two episode twenty-eight, Austin Creed's computer malfunctions and the files associated with the GM mode are corrupted. While the explanation refers to real-world events, the GMs developed a kayfabe *BOTB* explanation where the file associated with GM mode went missing, and the GMs had to work together, despite their differences, to recover the files by winning a game of *Minesweeper*. Although SummerSlam is presented as one four-hour event over two recordings, the events were streamed five months apart. In the five months between SummerSlam uploads, some performers left the WWE, resulting in some opponents being listed as portal. For example, Big E had a significant feud with Renee Young heading into the first SummerSlam upload in July 2020, but she left the company in August 2020. Therefore, she was listed as portal for the December 2020 upload of SummerSlam.

As the SummerSlam uploads were livestreams, the GMs received some questions regarding their use of the term portal. The GMs had the following conversation with their live audience:

Austin Creed: For those of you who don't know what portal means, portal means sometimes we have to shuffle people that are on the show. Take a second...

Prince Pretty: Not sometimes. Like every second day! Man!

Austin Creed: All the time.

Prince Pretty: We've got a full turnover of this damn roster.

Austin Creed: We don't have to explain it. Take a second. Think to yourself on reasons why we might have to do that. ("Battle of the Brands S2E28 Part 2" 11:43-12:00)

As discussed earlier, the GMs work under the assumption that the audience is savvy enough to figure out why the changes in a person's employment status may lead to a portal. The GMs were correct, as some discerning individuals would track changes to the *BOTB* universe in the video's comments. Consider this post from a commenter who noted a total of six changes to the rosters featured in the in-game WWE:

"Here are the changes that I figured out:

No way Jose -> Dolph Ziggler

Scott Dawson->Michael McGillicutty

EC3->Riddick Moss

Drake Maverick->Isaiah Swerve Scott
Aiden English->Corey Graves
Dash Wilder->Keith Lee.”

Another commenter responded to the list with the following chain of superstars: “Harper->No Way Jose->Dolph Ziggler.” Dolph Ziggler represented the third unique wrestler occupying the same create-a-wrestler spot in the *BOTB* universe. Thus, while the GMs could not say that a wrestler was “future endeavored” in WWE parlance, fans could connect real-world releases to portals in the *BOTB* universe. The term portal simultaneously allows *BOTB* to maintain its channel-specific kayfabe while potentially following rules developed by WWE. The GM’s creation of the term portal fits in with the wrestling tradition of developing specialized terminology. However, unlike previous terms exclusively reserved for wrestling insiders, the term portal is featured in content meant for a large audience.

Storyworld within a Storyworld: How *BOTB* rejects and references WWE’s televised kayfabe

While it is never explicitly stated on *BOTB*, there may be rules provided by WWE regarding references to former talent, especially if those individuals are working for rival promotions like Impact Wrestling or AEW. Austin Creed, during a discussion of a high school interaction with Cody Rhodes, stated, “I went to rival high schools with someone who shall not be named. I don’t think I’m allowed to talk about him now” (“Battle of the Brands S2E24” 51:50-51:57). In response to Creed, Prince Pretty jokes, “We will call him the Nightmare man” (52:00-52:01). The “Nightmare man” references former AEW executive vice-president Cody Rhodes, as his nickname is “The American Nightmare.”

Beyond creating portals to maintain kayfabe for their digital WWE, Austin Creed and Prince Pretty showcase an ability to develop storylines that integrate real-life events, reference famous wrestling events, and build UpUpDownDown kayfabe. *BOTB* managed to do all three things in two short videos used to lay the groundwork for *BOTB*’s second season. Season two begins with Austin Creed challenging Tyler Breeze to a wrestling match for the number one pick in the upcoming superstar draft. Creed makes the argument that “Tyler Breeze has never, in his life, defeated Austin Creed in a wrestling match. Never Ever” (“Battle of the Brands - Season 2 We’re Back!” 2:21-2:29). Breeze rebuts the claim of having multiple wrestling victories, and Creed responds with, “How is that the case when Austin Creed has never had a wrestling match in WWE? Thank you” (“Battle of the Brands - Season 2: We’re Back!” 2:34-2:40). One thing accomplished in this brief interaction is establishing UpUpDownDown personality Austin Creed as a separate character

from WWE superstar Xavier Woods even if the same real-world performer plays both characters. This idea of a performer playing multiple characters fits nicely within the wrestling tradition as many performers cycle through many names and gimmicks before becoming successful.

BTOB's next episode begins with Tyler Breeze “walking out” to cut a promo in front of a digital crowd. This walk out features Breeze’s WWE theme song as he holds the UpUpDownDown Championship. Austin Creed picks Cesaro to wrestle on his behalf as he is suffering from a real-world Achilles injury. Creed gloats as he tells Tyler Breeze, “You’re screwed, Breeze. You’re screwed. You can’t beat Cesaro. Why did he get called up? Because he beat the hell out of you so well” (“Battle of the Brands S2E2” 4:18-4:26). Unfortunately for Creed, Cesaro turns heel and aligns with Breeze, thus forming LeftRightLeftRight. As Cesaro reveals his LeftRightLeftRight shirt, he confesses, “It was me, Austin. It was me all along.” (“Battle of the Brands S2E2” 5:23-5:27). This comment serves as an intertextual reference to when Vince McMahon revealed himself as the Greater Power to Steve Austin on the June 7th, 1999, episode of *Monday Night Raw*.

In ten minutes over two episodes, the performers created a narrative arc that not only applies to *BOTB* but to the prestigious UpUpDownDown championship. Furthermore, these segments establish the channel’s kayfabe with the villain Tyler Breeze developing a gaming equivalent of the New World Order, the stable of wrestlers that led a storyline invasion of WCW in the late 1990s. Tyler Breeze would take all the actions expected by a heel inspired by the NWO, including expanding his power by finding new stable members, creating his own title, airing promos reminiscent of the New World Order and, of course, developing merchandise. The performers may not play the characters we see on weekly television, but this digital WWE universe allows them to create their own kayfabe that simultaneously stands alone and references events from both the WWE televised universe and real life.

Conclusion

To close, let’s revisit Austin Creed’s assertion that UpUpDownDown exists as a “kingdom within a kingdom” (“Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference” 12:05-12:08). As an ostensibly sovereign entity, *BOTB* shows us the evolution of kayfabe in the meta-fan era. Kayfabe is no longer a singular construct that exclusively refers to the kayfabe of the televised product. In its establishment of a series kayfabe within a company kayfabe, UpUpDownDown’s *BOTB* paves the way for other performers to create their own storyworlds underneath the WWE banner.

These storyworlds give performers an additional outlet for their creativity and give fans more material to enjoy and examine. Despite the difficulty of balancing

different conceptualizations of kayfabe, *BOTB* became a series rich with meaning for the audience. Given the depth of the material featured in the series, fans could watch or rewatch episodes and leave with different perspectives. These repeat viewings allow fans to explore further the intertextual and metatextual references from the performers on the channel and the fans in the comment section. Austin Creed once responded to fan criticism of his in-game booking with the following rant, “Some people were like Woods is a bad GM. Then why are you guys watching everything so intently with the UpUpDownDown championship? Who do you think is the GM of that?” (“Battle of the Brands #56” 18:56-19:05) While fans can certainly criticize his in-game booking tendencies, there should be no doubt about how his creation of UpUpDownDown and *BOTB* has changed the landscape for discussions of kayfabe.

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