

Kayfabe and Authenticity: The Challenges of Extending Professional Wrestling Storyworlds to Comics

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The storyworlds of professional wrestling are defined by the contentious and ever-evolving relationship between fantasy and reality, framed here in terms of “kayfabe” (i.e., the performative conceit that professional wrestling is a legitimate sporting contest). This paper analyzes the challenges of adapting professional wrestling’s kayfabe storyworlds to the comic book page through three case studies: Marvel Comics’ WCW (1992–1993), Super Genius’ WWE Superstars (2013–2015), and BOOM! Studios’ WWE (2017–2019). Each of these adaptations advances a distinct approach to storytelling and relationship to the core product of live professional wrestling. In seeking a sports-like presentation, Marvel’s WCW reveals the limits of kayfabe and the logic of professional wrestling beyond the confines of the live event. Super Genius’ WWE Superstars departs from the narrative conventions of professional wrestling as a genre, and instead seeks authenticity to WWE’s corporate identity in the Network era. Finally, BOOM! Studios’ WWE represents a return to kayfabe and the narrative logic of professional wrestling, updating WCW’s approach for the so-called “reality era” and its “smart” fans. In adapting professional wrestling storyworlds from different eras in markedly different ways, these comics are authentic to different aspects of a genre defined by inauthenticity.

Keywords: adaptation; authenticity; comic books; kayfabe; professional wrestling; transmedia storytelling

Despite its commitment to long-form serialized storytelling featuring violent confrontations between colorful, vaguely superhuman characters, the genre of professional wrestling has only been represented in comic book form sporadically. No doubt this owes partly to the fact that, as Eero Laine correctly observes, “Professional wrestling is theatre” and developed specifically in relation to the possibilities and limitations of the live event (1). Whether considered as a unique form of specifically theatrical performance or as a medium-agnostic genre defined by a suite of distinctive narrative conventions, it’s undeniable that professional

wrestling has lived primarily in the theatrical space and mediated derivations thereof, both live (simultaneous television or streaming broadcasts) and recorded (retrospectives, repeats, clips, archives, etc.). But as the COVID era of empty-arena shows so forcefully demonstrated, it is not just the liveness of the event that matters; for one, the presence and participation of the audience in that shared space is equally crucial (see Fontaine; Ford). Adapting the characters, narrative conventions, and physical action of the squared circle to other media, then, can be considered similarly to other forms of adaptation, where ontological incompatibilities between media necessarily result in changes to the form, content, and affect of the material being adapted. The specific appeals of live professional wrestling—the physical bodies and athleticism of the performers; the improvisatory quality of the matches; the participatory audience and the possibility that they might influence the direction of the serial narrative; the possibility of slippage between the fictional (“kayfabe”) storyworld occupied by the characters and the real world occupied by the athletes performing them—all resist adaptation to the comic book page. Given such incompatibilities, adapting professional wrestling to the comic book page risks stripping the genre of just about everything that makes it unique and compelling to its fans, effectively reducing it to de-powered superheroes engaging in repetitive sporting contests. This article will focus specifically on how professional wrestling’s narrative content is modified through the process of adaptation from live event to comic book, with particular attention paid to how kayfabe has been mobilized in different eras.

Given professional wrestling’s structural relationship to the live event, the relative absence of comics adapting these characters, stories, and storyworlds makes more sense. Nevertheless, there have been at least a few attempts to do so, and I will grapple with three of them here. First, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling* (Marvel Comics, 1992–1993), which ran for just twelve issues, offers what might be described as an early failure in transmedia storytelling, providing fans with the same kind of content that could be seen on television each week on shows like *WCW Saturday Night*, albeit in a different format. While the ideal of transmedia storytelling as articulated by Henry Jenkins would see episodes within a singular and coherent storyworld spread across different kinds of mediated experiences, “with each medium [doing] what it does best,” Marvel’s *WCW* maintains the genre conventions of the original televised product despite the shift to comics and essentially operates within a separate storyworld whose continuity with the televised product is ambiguous at best (*Convergence Culture* 96). By contrast, the more recent series *WWE Superstars* (Super Genius, 2013–2015) adapts the WWE Universe in a very different and less literal way. Despite being co-written by former

WWE performer Mick “Cactus Jack/Dude Love/Mankind” Foley, *WWE Superstars* largely abandons depictions of in-ring competition altogether and instead presents the company’s iconic characters, props, and scenarios in generically unfamiliar contexts. Across its three story arcs, the series reimagines the WWE Universe first as a hardboiled noir, then as a *Rashomon*-inspired comic mystery, and finally as a futuristic sci-fi story set on Mars. WWE’s most recent attempt at comics, the eponymous *WWE* (BOOM! Studios, 2017–2019), ran for twenty-five regular issues and is undoubtedly the most successful and satisfying comic from a pure storytelling perspective. Written by self-professed wrestling fan Dennis Hopeless (perhaps best known as the writer of Marvel’s *Spider-Woman* and *All-New X-Men*), this series adapts and expands upon completed storylines from the company’s recent past, filling in the gaps between televised matches and promos with fictionalized “behind-the-scenes” material and fleshing out characters’ motivations and backstories via flashbacks and first-person narration (Yehl).

Significantly, Hopeless’ *WWE* was described by publisher BOOM! Studios as “the most authentic line of ongoing WWE comics” (“WWE”). As the *only* ongoing line of WWE comics at the time, this was perhaps not a very meaningful declaration; however, the concept of authenticity is an interesting one to consider against all three of the aforementioned series, especially in relation to professional wrestling’s qualified relationship to authenticity more generally. The term comes up again and again in scholarly analyses of professional wrestling, but with little consistency. For instance, Jenkins finds authenticity in the “pain and rage” stoked by wrestling’s narratives, particularly when they draw upon “populist myths of economic exploitation and class solidarity, [feed] a hunger for homosocial bonding, or [speak] to utopian fantasies of empowerment” (“Never Trust a Snake” 52); in other words, professional wrestling itself is largely inauthentic, but the affective audience reactions it provokes are genuine. Laine associates authenticity with the “hardcore” style, which lays bare the physical pain endured by performers in a visceral and undeniable way even as it also necessarily exposes the inauthenticity of the sporting contest itself (62); similarly, Lucy Nevitt points to “Pain [as] the authentic core of wrestling,” that which “sets wrestling apart from stage and film fighting and is its central defence against accusations from outsiders that wrestling is ‘fake’” (84). Andrew Zolides locates authenticity in wrestlers’ public performances outside of the squared circle, namely on social media (56), while Cory Barker’s analysis of WWE’s own forays into social media production reveals that “the authentic and the real are purposefully inaccessible in the realm of professional wrestling” (170). Despite their varied interpretations, what all of these disparate claims share is a recognition that the core product offered by professional wrestling—the characters, the matches, the

angles and feuds—are fundamentally inauthentic; if authenticity can be found, it will only appear around the margins of the staged performance.

So what would it mean, then, for a comic book to be “authentic” to a genre largely premised on inauthenticity? At root, the question comes back around to the irresistible and inescapable concept of kayfabe: that is, “the presentation of professional wrestling as sport that is not predetermined” (Laine 19). Imagine if the Marvel Cinematic Universe purported to be a documentary—the myriad efforts required to sustain that illusion (even if nobody believed it for a second!) would be akin to kayfabe. The obviously scripted, clearly pre-determined, and resolutely non-physical representations offered by comic books would seem to foreclose on the possibility of maintaining kayfabe, and yet these comics largely do just that. However, there are nuances between the three comics’ approaches, and in their relationships to kayfabe and authenticity, that are worth parsing with greater specificity. If *WCW* is authentic to anything, it is to the look of the televised product and to the strictures of kayfabe as adhered to in the early 1990s; the comic thereby reveals the limits of kayfabe and the logic of professional wrestling beyond the confines of the live event. By contrast, *WWE Superstars* departs from the narrative conventions of professional wrestling itself and instead seeks authenticity to WWE’s corporate identity in the Network era. This series, like much of the original content WWE produced for the WWE Network, recontextualized the company’s branded iconography in non-sportive contexts in a push for content diversification beyond their core wrestling-based product. Finally, *WWE* represents a return to kayfabe and the narrative logic of professional wrestling, updating *WCW*’s approach for the so-called “reality era” and its “smart” fans; if *WWE* is truly the “most authentic” line of wrestling comics, it is because it mobilizes fans’ “insider” knowledge of performers’ lives outside of WWE’s fictional storyworld in order to heighten their emotional investment in specific characters/performers, as well as in the WWE brand more generally. Ultimately, in adapting professional wrestling storyworlds in markedly different ways, all three of these comics are authentic to different aspects of this inherently inauthentic genre. While this analysis should be of primary interest to scholars working in the fields of professional wrestling studies and comics studies, my findings may also be of interest to those working in adaptation studies, and media studies more generally, insofar as they engage with an understudied form of adaptation (professional wrestling/“sports entertainment” to comics) and reflect some of the challenges inherent to both adaptation and transmedia storytelling.

Case Study #1: Marvel Comics’ *World Championship Wrestling*

For most of its history, professional wrestling’s approach to storytelling has been closely linked to the imperative that the fictional illusion be maintained at all times

in order to “protect the business.” Writing in the late 1990s, Jenkins described the narrative conventions of televised professional wrestling thusly:

the programs’ formats mimic the structures and visual styles of non-fiction television, of sports coverage, news broadcasts, and talk shows. The fiction is, of course, that all of this fighting is authentic, spontaneous, unscripted. The WWF narrative preserves the illusion at all costs. There is no stepping outside the fiction, no acknowledgement of the production process or the act of authorship. When the performers are featured in *WWF Magazine*, they are profiled in character. Story segments are told in the form of late-breaking news reports or framed as interviews. The commentators are taken by surprise, interrupted by seemingly unplanned occurrences. (“Never Trust a Snake” 51)

From April 1992 to March 1993, Marvel’s *WCW* comic extended this logic from the television product to the comic book medium, essentially remediating the televised format using standard comics conventions: with just one exception, a significant portion of each issue is devoted to standard in-ring competition, narrated by a team of ringside commentators via a glut of caption boxes.¹ While the comic book medium is fundamentally incapable of maintaining the illusion that the narrative is unscripted or “real” in any meaningful sense, it compensates for this lack by presenting a more comprehensive account of a world in which wrestling *is* real than is possible on television. Whenever the narrative ventures beyond the ring—whether to the arena’s backstage area (in issue #9), to a children’s hospital (#8), or to a wrestling-themed “bruise cruise” (#3)—we see the law of kayfabe in full effect: as on the televised product, there is “no stepping outside the fiction” in these comics. Indeed, the comic goes out of its way to characterize professional wrestling in no uncertain terms as a legitimate sport; as Sting announces in the first issue, “Wrestling’s a sport--! The only *true* sport! No wimpy time-outs, no padding, or protection! We work for our reputations every stinking night!” (Lackey, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling Vol. 1, No. 1* 27). In short, the comic provides a snapshot of kayfabe as practiced throughout most of the genre’s history and into the early 1990s—as represented by an insistence on portraying professional wrestling as sport—even as the very premise of the comic undermines the claim: if wrestling was

¹ As I’ve written elsewhere, the difference between remediation and adaptation is important: “an adaptation is a text in which “the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted.” A remediation is essentially the inverse, wherein the medium is the focus of the appropriation and the content is irrelevant. Of course, it’s also possible for a text to adapt and remediate simultaneously” (Jeffries, *Comic Book Film Style* 16). For more on remediation and its distinctiveness from adaptation, see pp. 13–16.

a sport, rather than a narrative genre along the lines of the superhero or musical theatre (on the latter, see Laine 5), could a comic book focusing on play-by-play action alone reasonably sustain itself and engage its readers, even for a single issue?² The appeal of professional wrestling clearly lies in its combination of sport—the physical bodies and the incredible feats of athleticism they’re able to perform—and narrative storytelling, both within an individual match and as a long-form serialized storyworld.

One challenge that *WCW* faced early in its publication run related to its subordinate position relative to the company’s televised live events. As a storytelling genre, professional wrestling is unusually subject to real-world contingencies that can force the bookers (i.e., storytellers) to change the direction of the planned narrative on the fly; these range from an unanticipated audience reaction (whether positive or negative), an injury that sidelines a performer in the middle of a feud, or even a performer leaving the company. The latter occurred in 1992 when Lex Luger left *WCW* to join Vince McMahon’s World Bodybuilding Federation, and the World Wrestling Federation thereafter. Luger wrestled his last match in *WCW* on February 29, 1992, which would be roughly contemporaneous with the first issue of *WCW* hitting newsstands.³ Given that comic books must pass through multiple stages of creative work and production before seeing print, the content of any individual issue must be locked in several months ahead of publication, resulting in a significant time-lag between the narratives being told on live television compared to those on the printed page. In the series’ debut issue, Luger is clearly established as the series’ central character and a formidable heel champion, which makes it surprising when he is hastily written out of the story in the final pages of the second issue. After successfully defending his championship in a 3-on-1 handicap match, Luger “[takes his] leave” for “greener pastures,” championship reign intact (Lackey, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling Vol. 1, No. 2* 26). Presumably written prior to Luger’s loss to Sting at *SuperBrawl II* but published after the fact, the way the comic writes Luger out of the story boldly conflicts with the narrative as told to television viewers. Such are the challenges inherent in serialized transmedia storytelling, which demands

² While this article focuses specifically on comics adaptations of professional wrestling, there is a broader world of sports-themed comics that are relevant to this discussion. While Marvel and DC have made some attempts to integrate sports and superheroes (Marvel’s short-lived *NFL SuperPro* [1991–1992], whose publication history partially overlaps with Marvel’s *WCW*, comes to mind), the genre of sports comics is most popular in the Japanese context. As in some of the wrestling comics discussed here, the emphasis is squarely on character and narrative rather than play-by-play action. See Schodt 60–62 and Collins 1736–39.

³ Comic books are typically “cover dated” two months after their street date, so *WCW* #1’s April 1992 cover date would put it on newsstands in February.

coordination and consistency across platforms (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 95–96): the different production schedules of comics and live television, as well as professional wrestling’s relationship to contingency, only magnify these challenges. BOOM! Studios’ *WWE*’s similarly close relationship to televised narratives solves this problem in a novel way, but before getting to that series we’ll first turn our attention to a comic book that adapts *WWE*’s storyworld far more loosely.

Case Study #2: Super Genius’ *WWE Superstars*

WWE Superstars effectively takes the opposite tack compared to *WCW*, discarding wrestling’s connection to sport almost entirely and focusing instead of telling novel stories with familiar characters and iconography from across the history of *WWE*. The series’ co-writer, former wrestler Mick Foley, described his approach in direct opposition to that taken in earlier comics like Marvel’s *WCW*: “When I got together with my co writer [sic] Shane Riches we did not want to just give a comic book version of the *WWE* show. We just didn’t want to give fans the same thing they can see every Monday and Friday night on television” (MacDonald). If Marvel’s *WCW* presents a parallel version of *WCW*’s primary televised storyworld, *WWE Superstars* would be better conceptualized as a series of “Elseworlds” takes on the *WWE* Universe.⁴ Additionally, if *WCW* requires its readers to accept the illusion of kayfabe, *WWE Superstars* follows the lead of contemporary professional wrestling by redefining the genre not as sport but rather as “sports entertainment”—a deliberately vague category coined by Linda McMahon in 1989 to dodge a New Jersey tax on tickets to sporting events that has since come to be a cornerstone of *WWE*’s brand identity (Jeffries and Kannegiesser 65).⁵

All of the comics considered in this article should be understood not as professional wrestling texts themselves but rather as adaptations of televised professional wrestling. Linda Hutcheon usefully theorizes adaptation as a three-staged process: first, a text is changed in some way, whether in genre, medium, format, or point-of-view; second, a new text is created that (re-)interprets and (re)creates the older text (i.e., repetition with difference); and third, the adaptation is received in dialogue with its originary text as an adaptation thereof (7–8). We can

⁴ In DC Comics, “Elseworlds” refer to stories set in alternate realities compared to the main storyworld established in the company’s ongoing titles.

⁵ *AEW*’s success as an upstart promotion has been largely contingent on its explicit embrace of professional wrestling, as a direct contrast to *WWE*’s alignment with sports entertainment. On the March 16, 2022 episode of *AEW*’s *Dynamite*, for instance, former *WCW* and *WWE* performer Chris Jericho executed a self-reflexive heel turn premised entirely on defining himself as a “sports entertainer” rather than a “professional wrestler.” The heat Jericho generated during this promo speaks volumes about many wrestling fans’ vocal antipathy for *WWE*’s coinage. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oupHBAz1LE> for the full promo.

see how each of these three stages is deployed in *WWE Superstars*' first arc, titled "Money in the Bank." First, the characters and narrative logic of the contemporary WWE is transposed into a new medium (comics) and a distinct generic context (hardboiled noir). The comic then recasts the WWE roster in roles that loosely correspond to their in-ring personas: for instance, the polarizing babyface John Cena becomes a disgraced police officer beloved by half the town and hated by the other, the McMahons ("the Authority") become a crime family that pulls the strings from behind the scenes, and CM Punk becomes a straight-edge anarchist that wants to tear the whole corrupt system down. The narrative draws upon and assumes the reader's familiarity with the in-ring histories of these characters to provide an implied backstory for the animosities and ambitions that fuel the comic's noir plot. Despite the lack of in-ring competition, the comic gives its characters ample opportunity to shout their catchphrases (the first issue opens with the words "You can't see me") and perform their signature maneuvers, and even culminates in something resembling WWE's annual "Money in the Bank" ladder match, wherein the first competitor to climb a ladder and retrieve a briefcase suspended above the ring wins a contract for a future title match. (In the comic, there's a briefcase full of stolen cash hidden in the ceiling above a wrestling ring.) By transposing WWE's iconography and personalities into a new genre, the comic provides the "repetition with difference" that allows readers to read the comic in dialogue with the core televised product, and allows fans to apply their knowledge of WWE in a new narrative context.

Like Marvel's *WCW*, *WWE Superstars* provides a snapshot of how a professional wrestling promotion wants to be understood by its fans at a particular moment in time: whereas *WCW* encapsulates a more straight-forward era defined by kayfabe and a heightened sports-like presentation, *WWE Superstars* emphasizes how the company's branded iconography (including its larger-than-life characters) moves across genres and platforms. Significantly, the narrative takes place in the fictional metropolis of Titan City, a reference to WWE's old corporate name, Titan Sports. This places "Money in the Bank" in the company of several other of WWE's contemporaneous attempts at content diversification, many of which are similarly premised on reimagining the company as a geographical space. Such texts include *Slam City*, a series of animated shorts in which WWE characters find new jobs in the titular *Slam City*; *Scooby Doo! WrestleMania Mystery*, a direct-to-DVD animated film in which Scooby and the gang travel to WWE City to attend *WrestleMania*; and *Camp WWE*, an animated series that reimagines the WWE Universe as a summer camp, with WWE Superstars and executives reimagined as campers and counsellors. The consistency with which WWE imagines itself as a physical space is notable (see

Jeffries and Kannegiesser) and evokes Jonathan Gray's claim that, through our media consumption, "we are all part-time residents of the highly populated cities of Time Warner, DirecTV, AMC, Sky, Comcast, ABC, Odeon, and so forth" (1). Of course, it's no coincidence that each of the aforementioned WWE adaptations is roughly contemporaneous with the launch of the WWE Network in January 2014, which was the company's attempt to be considered in the same breath as the massive corporations cited by Gray—in the company's own words, as "an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment" rather than a professional wrestling promotion (Jeffries, "Introduction" 2).

If "Money in the Bank" is an intergeneric adaptation of the contemporaneous WWE, *Superstars'* third and final arc, "Legends," narrativizes the logic underlying the WWE Network as a whole. Billed as a comprehensive archive of WWE history, including every television episode, every pay-per-view event, self-mythologizing documentaries, and even tape libraries acquired from defunct promotions like WCW, the WWE Network allows viewers to keep up-to-date on the current product while also diving into the history of professional wrestling (as curated by and around WWE). "Legends" explicitly borrows its premise from Marvel Comics' first major crossover event, *Secret Wars* (1984–1985), putting performers from various eras together on the same page. Whereas *Secret Wars* takes place on Battleworld, "Legends" takes place on "Battleground World," a clumsy portmanteau of *Secret Wars'* Battleworld and WWE's *Battleground*, one of the company's annual pay-per-view events. One area of Battleground World is "WWE Island," whose visualization is a clear tip of the hat to professional wrestling's roots in the traveling carnival. At the climax of the narrative, Battleground World is revealed to be Mars, purchased by WWE in 2217 and terraformed into "the ultimate venue in sports entertainment" (Foley and Riches, *WWE Superstars Vol. 1, No. 12* 1). With this reveal in issue #12, the narrative is fairly explicit in portraying Battleground World as an allegorical stand-in for the WWE Network. In the comic, Triple H explains how "temporal displacement rays" can be used:

to pluck *WWE Superstars* from any time period and zap 'em here to battle in an era-spanning tournament to prove who is the greatest *WWE Superstar* of all time. Over *one hundred thousand* satellites capture every matchup and smackdown to broadcast across the *WWE* universe. Any setting. Any time period. Any *WWE Superstar*. All for just \$9.99. (1; emphases in original)

The \$9.99 cost cited in the story is not arbitrary; it is the exact price of a monthly WWE Network subscription, which was a constant refrain on WWE programming

in the wake of its 2014 launch.⁶ It's possible to read this moment both as an on-the-nose bit of cross-promotion and, more charitably, as a parody of WWE's incessant shilling for the WWE Network following its initial launch.

As Shane Toepfer observes in his ethnographic study of wrestling fans, a wide swath of WWE's viewers have felt alienated by the company's transition from a professional wrestling federation designed to resemble and heighten the appeal of competitive sports to a "sports entertainment" brand in which in-ring competition is increasingly marginalized for the sake of other forms of storytelling and spectacle (104). This transition is well-captured by the differences between Marvel's *WCW* and Super Genius' *WWE Superstars*, the former of which maintains the core logic of the televised product while the latter abandons altogether any and all pretence that professional wrestling is a sport. Despite being a niche product aimed squarely at existing WWE fans, *WWE Superstars* is notable precisely for what it lacks: actual *wrestling*. Recall Sting's impassioned devotion to in-ring competition from *WCW #1*, which specifically exalts those aspects of the genre that resemble sport: physicality, competition, and fair play. Compare this to how an off-panel "Rowdy" Roddy Piper describes an impossible match-up—a hypothetical "dream match"—between John Cena and the late Ultimate Warrior in *WWE Superstars #9*: "It's entertainment" (Foley and Riches, *WWE Superstars Vol. 1, No. 9* 7). More than an unusual attempt at intergeneric adaptation (though it certainly is that), *WWE Superstars* is emblematic of WWE's ongoing shift from a professional wrestling promotion to a media empire, from an entity bound by the narrative logic of kayfabe to a corporation that imagines itself as "an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment," unrestricted by genre or medium (qtd. in Jeffries, "Introduction" 2).

Case Study #3: BOOM! Studios' *WWE*

This brings us to WWE's most recent attempt, as of this writing at least, to adapt its characters to the comic book page. The narrative approach taken by writer Dennis Hopeless in BOOM! Studios' *WWE* bears some surface similarities to Marvel's *WCW* but is also distinct in some crucial ways. Both comics seek to tell stories set in the storyworld established in their respective promotion's regular televised content (*WCW Saturday Night* in *WCW*; *Raw*, *SmackDown* and various pay-per-view events in *WWE*), but whereas *WCW* focuses primarily on the moment-to-moment action of specific matches, *WWE* takes a broader view in which individual matches and championships are contextualized within characters' overall careers. If the purpose

⁶ In the United States, the WWE Network has ceased to exist as a standalone streaming platform since the publication of the comic and is now housed as part of NBC's Peacock service.

of *WCW* was to replicate the existing televised product in comic book form, *WWE*'s goal seems to be to canonize specific storylines while also enhancing readers' emotional investment in particular characters or performers. In contrast to *BOOM!* Studios' claim to authenticity, though, *WWE*'s adherence to kayfabe is especially inauthentic to the contemporary *WWE*, which is lauded by fans for its self-reflexivity and increased willingness to acknowledge its status as performative fiction (Jeffries, "Introduction" 6). In this respect, *WWE* is more closely aligned with previous wrestling comics like *WCW* in its positing of a world where professional wrestling is real and performers "live the gimmick" 24/7. In the pursuit of narrative consistency with the televised product, however, *WWE* is ultimately inauthentic both to the contingency inherent to the genre—that feeling that anything can happen, including performers going "off-script"—and to the self-reflexivity that defines the current phase of the company. As in actual professional wrestling, though, authenticity does seep in around the margins of the text, and it is clearly written for an audience of "smart" fans capable of decoding such references.

As suggested above, what's distinctive about *WWE* compared to *WCW* is precisely its relationship to specific, clearly defined story arcs that have been previously seen on television, and with which readers are assumed to be familiar. Rather than attempt to engage with contemporaneous, ongoing television storylines in either an additive or reflective capacity, *WWE* instead retells and expands upon significant storylines from the company's recent past. The narrative interest, then, is not of the *what will happen next?* variety but rather stems from how the comic will modify or augment readers' understanding of these familiar stories and characters. In addition to the change in medium, the "difference" part of the Hutcheon's "repetition with difference" criterion is satisfied by changes in storytelling structure—the comics' narratives are radically streamlined compared to how they originally played out over months of televised live events—and point-of-view, which reframes the narratives through the first-person lens of characters like Seth Rollins, Bayley, and AJ Styles. As such, these comics don't simply transfer the storytelling logic and surface aesthetics of the professional wrestling genre to a new medium, as was the case with *WCW*; they also adapt and streamline particular stories and character arcs, offering fans novel information and insights into the characters as a result of the shift to first-person narration. With respect to kayfabe, then, *WWE* seeks to have its cake and eat it too, extending kayfabe beyond the live event in precisely the way that Jenkins ascribes to '90s *WWF* while also mobilizing the much higher level of knowledge possessed by the average wrestling fan today compared to the early 1990s.

The decision to mine completed, rather than ongoing, storylines for narrative content makes a great deal of practical sense and allows *WWE* to sidestep the difficulties that Marvel's *WCW* encountered with Lex Luger's departure from *WCW*, which left that comic without its central antagonist after just two issues. Following the precedent set by *WWE Superstars*, it also gives *WWE* another outlet for the kind of self-mythologizing that its Network documentaries have specialized in, which allow performers to break kayfabe, appearing as themselves and reflecting upon their careers, albeit in a context that is always authorized and controlled by *WWE*. These documentaries (e.g., the *WWE Network's WWE 24* series) encourage *WWE* fans to develop meaningful parasocial bonds with the performers themselves, rather than (or in addition to) the fictional characters they portray on television. Where *WWE* is more similar to Marvel's *WCW* than *WWE Network* documentaries, however, is in the comic's steadfast refusal to break kayfabe; even as it consistently assumes a "smart" reader with a great deal of knowledge about the performers' real lives, the characters themselves think and behave as though professional wrestling was a legitimate sporting competition.

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's discussion of kayfabe's co-constructedness and fans' emotional investment in professional wrestling is useful in understanding the potential appeal of *WWE* compared to actual professional wrestling. As Reinhard writes, "Kayfabe can feel real to fans because of how they emotionally engage with professional wrestling and make sense of what they see. If fans have a connection to the wrestlers and their stories, then they can become entangled in the kayfabe, suspend their disbelief, and believe in the fiction" (33). Certainly, fans can become immersed and invested in a match in which the outcome is predetermined but unknown to them—that's a testament to professional wrestlers' in-ring storytelling abilities—but what about when the outcomes are *known* and the story obviously written, as is the case in *WWE*? In these comics, readers shift into a comparative mode, wherein interest is generated by how the comics restructure and refine familiar narratives compared to their original televised versions. In particular, readers would be interested to see how *Hopeless* draws upon performers' real lives and personalities (as discernible from interviews, documentaries, social media, etc.) to flesh out their kayfabe counterparts.

The first year of the series centers on *The Shield* (Seth Rollins, Dean Ambrose, and Roman Reigns). The series' first arc (issues #1–4) details the rise of Rollins as a solo star, beginning with his betrayal of *The Shield* and culminating in his triumphant return from injury at the 2015 *Extreme Rules* pay-per-view event. While Rollins' injury was referenced on *WWE* programming, the comic takes readers into the hospital and rehab facilities, and even Rollins' home, fleshing out

his return to the ring as an act of defiance against Triple H and the Authority. As such, this first arc functions as a kayfabe counterpart to the *WWE 24* documentary focusing on Rollins in this same period. The second arc (#5–8) starts at *Extreme Rules* but shifts its focus to Ambrose, ending just at the outset of his main event push with his victory at the 2016 *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view. Much of this arc centers around an unlikely friendship between Ambrose and Sasha Banks as they travel from city to city together. The third arc (#9–12) again picks up precisely where the second one left off—at the 2016 *Money in the Bank* event, immediately following Ambrose’s victory—but shifts, finally, to Reigns’ perspective. Much of the narrative attention here is devoted to understanding how Reigns struggles with his negative crowd reaction among “smart” fans, which is typically understood as a response to bad booking rather than any specific antipathy toward Reigns himself, either as a character or performer.

The series’ second year featured a series of three disconnected storylines, detailing Bayley’s role in the “Women’s Evolution” (#14–17), the tortured friendship between Canadian indie-circuit darlings Kevin Owens and Sami Zayn (#18–20), and AJ Styles’ journey from the indies to WWE (#21–25). Each of these story arcs is defined by a common narrational approach, defined by non-linear storytelling (i.e., flashbacks) motivated by the protagonist’s first-person perspective. Focalizing the narration in this way provides an automatic difference from the highly restricted, omniscient narration provided in WWE’s televised programming and grants the comic reader access to these characters’ thoughts and motivations, as well as flashbacks to significant (fictional) moments in their lives prior to signing with WWE (e.g., Ambrose’s discovery of backyard “garbage” wrestling; Reigns’ struggle with divisive crowd reactions on the high school football field; Owens and Zayn discussing their WWE dreams between indie gigs). Such flashbacks imaginatively extend WWE’s kayfabe storyworld backwards in time, retconning these performers’ pre-WWE lives to cohere with their current WWE characters. Short for “retroactive continuity,” retconning refers to “when an author alters established facts in earlier works in order to make them consistent with later ones” (Wolf 380). In the case of *WWE*, this process effectively takes biographical information about WWE performers’ real lives and transforms it into “facts’ about an imaginary world” (Proctor 224). In addition to enhanced narrative continuity, the effect here is also to erase aspects of these performers’ biographies beyond WWE’s ownership; for instance, Owens and Zayn are seen working the indie circuit under their WWE ring names rather than their real names (Rami Sebei and Kevin Steen, respectively) and Zayn’s popular luchador character “El Generico,” which he used consistently on the indie circuit, is elided.

While both *WCW* and *WWE* maintain and extend kayfabe beyond the live event, the two adaptations—published more than two decades apart—illustrate an evolution in how professional wrestling addresses its audience. Christian Norman observes that:

As wrestling fans have become more knowledgeable and participatory, *WWE* has gradually shifted from addressing the audience as “marks” (who believe wrestling is unscripted or real) to “smarts” (who “know the inside of the business and the secrets behind the ruses—what is real and what is staged both in terms of story lines and moves”). (84)

If *WCW* addresses its narrative to an audience of presumed marks, *WWE* addresses its narrative to a readership of “smarts.” For “smart” fans, arguably the most compelling moments in *WWE* are precisely those where the fiction draws upon or even conflicts with their insider knowledge of performers’ lives outside of *WWE*. In issue #19, for instance, Owens refers to Zayn’s desire to hear *WWE* crowds chant “Olé!” (Hopeless, *WWE Vol. 1, No. 19*): for “smart” fans, this reads as an unambiguous, but necessarily implicit, allusion to Zayn’s retired El Generico persona. In contrast to Marvel’s *WCW*, Hopeless knows that readers know too much about the industry and these performers’ real lives to accept the kayfabe storyworld at face value; coded references like this thus function as winks to the “smart” fan, acknowledging and rewarding their knowledge without technically breaking kayfabe.

In some instances, however, *WWE*’s imperative to keep kayfabe goes beyond even that of the televised product, resulting in conflicting versions of the same story. For instance, in June 2016 Reigns was suspended for thirty days following a violation of *WWE*’s “wellness policy,” presumably after testing positive for an illicit drug (though not necessarily of the performance-enhancing variety). The transgression was publicly acknowledged by the company (“Roman Reigns Suspended”) by Reigns himself (@WWERomanReigns) and even within kayfabe on the June 27, 2016 episode of *Raw* (“Seth Rollins and Dean Ambrose Address”). Like a real-life injury or a contract dispute, Reigns’ suspension is another example of how the kayfabe storyworld is subject to real-world contingencies, but whereas Rollins’ real-life injury was integrated into the character’s narrative trajectory in *WWE*’s first arc, Reigns’ drug violation is simply erased and replaced by an absurd narrative contrivance. At the conclusion of *WWE* #10, Reigns gets into a scuffle with Ambrose at Stonehenge while on a European tour, toppling one of the monument’s massive stone tablets; Triple H suspends Reigns for his role in the brawl, rewriting history by providing an alternative rationale for his suspension (Hopeless, *WWE Vol. 1, No. 10*).

Conclusion

In closing, we must return to the question of authenticity more directly. *WWE* was sold to fans as the “most authentic” professional wrestling comic book, but what exactly does this mean? Authentic to what, exactly? To professional wrestling as a narrative genre, or to professional wrestling as a business? To the interactions between fictional characters, or to the real lives and motivations of the performers that embody those characters? None of the comics analyzed in this article acknowledge the fundamental inauthenticity at the heart of professional wrestling—that is, its baseline status as a fictional performance featuring performers playing characters that are distinct from their true selves. Paradoxically, however, refusing to acknowledge that inauthenticity may make these comics more authentic to professional wrestling as a narrative genre, which has historically followed the imperative to maintain kayfabe wherever possible.

One way that Marvel’s *WCW*, Super Genius’ *WWE Superstars*, and BOOM! Studios’ *WWE* could all be considered equally “authentic” is by virtue of their relationship to, via licensing agreements, the corporate entities that they bring to the comic book page. As J. Mark Percival writes in his examination of authenticity in cinematic adaptations of *Judge Dredd* comics, “a cultural product or phenomenon can be positioned as authentic when it is authenticated by an individual or institution that has the authority (cultural, social, political) to attribute authenticity to that product or phenomenon” (218). The institutions in this case would be *WCW* and *WWE* themselves, who license the use of their brands, characters, and iconography to publishers like Marvel, Super Genius, and BOOM! Studios as a means of diversifying the exploitation of their intellectual property; these corporations also determine what content is acceptable for print (e.g., the representation of wrestling as a legitimate sport in *WCW* and *WWE*, shilling for the *WWE Network* in *WWE Superstars*) and what is off-limits (e.g., Reigns’ violation of *WWE*’s wellness policy).

While these corporate entities have the exclusive legal right to “authorize” licensed products such as these, it is ultimately the fans who determine what succeeds or fails in the world of professional wrestling. Given fans’ increased knowledge of the industry and interest in what goes on behind-the-scenes, the generally brief publication spans of these comics suggest that there may be a fundamental disconnect between what fans want or expect from a comic book adaptation of professional wrestling and what these companies are willing to give them. It’s also possible, as the partial list of appeals in the opening paragraph of this article suggests, that comics are simply incompatible with what fans love about professional wrestling, and that even the most “authentic” adaptation couldn’t hope

to measure up to the real deal. Moreover, the comic book format is disempowering compared to the live event, which has accustomed fans to a level of participation and spontaneity that comic books are unable to replicate. Despite the repeated failure of these series, they remain compelling curiosities at the periphery of the business and should be considered alongside other professional wrestling spin-offs (e.g., cartoons like *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling*, feature films like *No Holds Barred*, and reality television series like *Total Divas* as a window into how corporations like WWE want professional wrestling to be understood, and what they think their fans want as a narrative supplement to live events.

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