

"The Most Convergent of All Media" -- An Editorial Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

As CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and I have written elsewhere (see Reinhard & Olson 2019), professional wrestling may be the most convergent of all media. Indeed, scholars such as Roland Barthes (1957/2012), Sharon Mazer (1998/2020), Heather Levi (2008), and Henry Jenkins (2005) have all observed that professional wrestling contains elements of live theatre, combat sports, film, television, soap opera, video games, sketch comedy, stand-up comedy, haunted house attractions, and more. These elements all come together inside the wrestling arena to create a truly unique form of spectacle.

From comedian/performance artist Andy Kaufman stepping into the ring against wrestler Jerry "The King" Lawler to Chris Jericho dubbing himself the "Ayatollah of Rock 'n' Rolla" after Lord Humungus in *Mad Max 2* aka *The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981), and from the members of the New Day entering the ring in *Dragonball Z* inspired gear to Kenny Omega adopting a theme song by *Final Fantasy XVI* composer Masayoshi Soken, the Squared Circle is the one place where nearly all media collide, much like the competitors who face off against one another in a battle royal.

Meanwhile, during the early years of the twenty-first century, professional wrestling has increasingly influenced other media, in something of a feedback loop. Of course, professional wrestling has long intersected with other forms of entertainment, as evidenced by wrestling-themed films such as *Flesh* (John Ford, 1932) and *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950) or by venerable comic Jack Benny stepping inside the ropes to referee a wrestling match in an episode of his eponymous TV show *The Jack Benny Program* (1950-1965). These days, however, professional wrestling seems to exert a much greater influence on the media landscape than ever before, with its tropes, characters, and personalities popping up in just about every corner of entertainment. Whether it is Kong hitting Godzilla with a standing suplex in *Kong x Godzilla: The New Empire* (Adam Wingard, 2024) or fictional luchador Silver Mask battling vampires in *The Strain* (both the novels and the spinoff TV series) or the current President of the United States cutting heel promos on his political opponents during interviews, professional wrestling appears to be everywhere these days. The rise of TV shows like *Heels* (2021-2023) and *Invincible Fight Girl* (2024-), comic books like *Do a Powerbomb!* and *Ringside*, films like *Calamari Wrestler* (Minoru Kawasaki, 2004) and *Dark Match* (Lowell Dean, 2024), and video games like *Guacamelee!* and *WrestleQuest* shows that wrestling has gone from being, as Colt Cabana put it, "the red-headed stepchild of popular culture" (Olson 307) to one of the more influential forms of media in the entire world.

In this issue of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal*, we explore this outsized influence by speaking to creators who have been inspired by professional wrestling in highly different ways. As David Beard notes in his foreword to this volume, we spoke with authors, game designers, and comic book creators who have drawn inspiration from the world of professional wrestling in their works. In novels such as *Cataract City*, tabletop RPGS like *Worldwide Wrestling*, and comic books including *The Crippler's Son* and *The Road to God Knows*, creators such as Craig Davidson, Nathan D. Paoletta, Max Riffner, and Von Allan all use their love of professional wrestling to create gripping narratives that also demonstrate how "sportive entertainment" (Gillespie & Smith) intersects with nearly every facet of life. Even poets such as Lizzy Flanagan and Brian Oliu have turned to professional wrestling promos – which often feature flamboyant and florid phrases – when creating their prose. From high art to low trash (regardless of whether those distinctions even mean anything), professional wrestling serves as a fountain of inspiration (not unlike the "cold" fountain that so vexed Hulk Hogan during his feud with the Dungeon of Doom).

With all that out of the way, I should introduce myself. My name is Christopher J. Olson, and I am Assistant Professor of English and Digital Media (though that will soon be changing to Assistant Professor of Communication) at Dickinson State University in North Dakota. I am also the new editor of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal*, taking over from

Matt Foy, who successfully guided the first three issues of the journal before deciding to step down from the position in 2024. Under Matt's leadership, the PWSJ collected vital scholarship on professional wrestling written by researchers in various fields, once again demonstrating how professional wrestling crosses paths with nearly all disciplines and just about every aspect of life. I hope to continue in Matt's footsteps, bringing together scholarship and creative works from a wide array of fields written by scholars, fans, and industry professionals alike.

I also owe thanks to reviews editor David Beard for pulling together all the threads of this issue as I try to settle into my new position and home. Without David's tireless efforts this issue would not be anywhere near as good as it is, and I will be forever grateful to him for coming up with the central theme of this issue and taking time out of his busy schedule to contact all the contributors and conduct many of the interviews. I am privileged to have David as a member of my editorial team and hope that he sticks around for a long time to come. We both hope that the texts spotlighted in this issue inspire you to write reviews, from a scholar's perspective, of the many texts generated about and around professional wrestling.

I also want to thank my assistant editor Aaron Horton for all his assistance and support thus far. In addition to being a rabid fan of professional wrestling, Aaron is a dedicated scholar who is devoted to studying this most bizarre form of entertainment and I honestly could not ask for a better second-in-command. I look forward to working more closely with Aaron during my tenure at the PWSJ, and when I eventually step down from my position as editor, I know that the PWSJ will be in good hands with him at the helm (if he agrees to take over after I leave, of course).

Anyway, I think this introduction has gone on long enough. I hope you enjoy this issue, and I trust that it will point you to some excellent books, games, poems, comics, and other texts that all feature professional wrestling in some capacity. Additionally, I hope it also inspires you to take some time to reflect on how professional wrestling has impacted your own life as a fan, a scholar, a creator, and a person, and maybe to think about how you can incorporate elements of professional wrestling into your own work, either creative or professional.

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"To Identify New Areas in which Research is Needed, and to Stimulate Such Research" -- A Foreword

DAVID E. BEARD

Founded less than a decade ago, the Professional Wrestling Studies Association has grown, slowly, steadily, into an interdisciplinary powerhouse. In taking professional wrestling as the core of its mission, the Association is making more and more important inroads both into the critical analysis of professional wrestling and into the critical interrogation of the impact of professional wrestling on American and global culture.

The mission of the society begins with the study of professional wrestling as a phenomenon. We seek “to gather from all relevant fields of study, and to disseminate among its members, current knowledge of professional wrestling, broadly construed.” This has included critique of wrestling as a performance, analysis of wrestling as a semiotic system, economic and sociological analysis of wrestling as an industry or as a sport. We have engaged analysis highlighting gender, race, and other intersectional identities. And we have engaged in comparative sociology, examining wrestling alongside other sports and alongside other performing arts (e.g., in Claire Warden, et al, “When was the Last Time that You Heard of Ian McKellen Blowing out His Knee? The Performance and Practice of Risk in British Professional Wrestling,” available here).

As a scholarly society, we have also identified critical vocabularies that are unique to professional wrestling. These critical vocabularies are potentially of value for unpacking dimensions of the culture outside wrestling. (See this journal’s special issue on “kayfabe,” collected here.). For example, while “kayfabe” is a term of art among professional wrestlers, it’s also a useful metaphor for unpacking human behaviors in other arenas, as Ben Cattaneo’s use of “kayfabe” in professional consulting. (Cattaneo is interviewed elsewhere within this issue.)

Professional wrestling studies, then, entails the close analysis of professional wrestling through diverse disciplinary and intellectual lenses.

In this issue, we want to expand our scholarly work by looking at the impact of professional wrestling on the arts and media. Focusing on fiction, games, and graphic novels (comics), we are opening the door to the study of wrestling as a cultural force.

In our first section, we interview **Craig Davidson**, a Canadian author who has published work under both his name and the pen names Patrick Lestewka and Nick Cutter. Davidson has graciously given us permission to reprint an excerpt from his 2013 novel *Cataract City* (a shortlisted nominee for the 2013 Scotiabank Giller Prize). *Cataract City* is one of the colloquial names for Niagara Falls, Ontario, and the book opens with some young boys, watching Bruiser Mahoney wrestle. In an interview, Davidson shares the impact professional wrestling had on his life and work.

In our second section, broadly themed around games, we talk first to **Ben Cattaneo** and **Robert Earl Stewart**. Cattaneo works as a consultant in decision studies; Stewart is a poet, memoirist, and journalist. Together, they invented a wrestling roleplaying game in their teenage years. Stewart wrote about that experience in an essay originally published in *Canadian Notes & Queries*, reprinted here by permission of the author. Then, in two interviews, Stewart and Cattaneo talk about the formative power of pro wrestling on their lives as authors, podcasters, and entrepreneurs.

Nathan D. Paoletta, designer of the contemporary and popular indy roleplaying game *World Wide Wrestling*, offers us a different entrypoint in pro wrestling. Unlike our first three creators, who discovered professional wrestling as children, Paoletta was introduced to wrestling while an adult, and he immediately saw the opportunities possibly in a roleplaying game. We reprint a section of the rules from *World Wide Wrestling* by permission of Paoletta, who is the game’s designer and publisher.

Importantly, Paoletta’s game is not merely a way to reconstruct Wrestlemania in your livingroom and in your imagination. Unlike video games, which offer the player the promise of wrestling as your favorite wrestler, in *World Wide Wrestling*, the players create the wrestler, the promotion, the world.

In our third section, we interview three comics creators (**Von Allan**, **Max Riffner**, and **Joanne Starer**). **Von Allan** never

once depicts wrestling in his comics, but in *The Road to God Knows*, the child in a family that struggles with a parent's mental illness escapes the sadness of life by watching the action in the ring. I am touched, myself — recognizing in *The Road to God Knows* the escape that professional wrestling also brought me as a child.

Family dynamics are also at the core of **Max Riffner's** *The Crippler's Son*. In his interview, Riffner recounts his formal education in comics studies, noting that wrestling, like Greek drama, is filled with emotion, pushing the passion out into the cheap seats. His own work in comics was transformed when he began to pull that kind of emotion into his storytelling.

Joanne Starer is not only a comics creator; she was once a promoter in professional wrestling. Her *Total Suplex of the Heart* explores women in professional wrestling from up close. In her interview, she talks about the roles of both comedy and social justice in her work.

Taken together, then, this special issue of the journal opens a door, creates an invitation, to our readers. Consistent with our mission, we invite works, we always will, that take professional wrestling as its object of study. But we also invite our readers (scholars, journalists, and professionals attached to professional wrestling as a community) to explore the reverberations of wrestling in literature, comics, games, and other media.

We invite book reviews of the novels, comics, even books of poetry that are inspired by professional wrestling. We invite analyses of the board, roleplaying, and video games that invite players to inhabit and create the worlds of professional wrestling. After all, it is part of our mission to identify new areas within the subject of professional wrestling in which research is especially needed, and to stimulate such research. Christopher Dickinson's introductory essay, on the intersections between wrestling, media, and culture, is a first step in stimulating such research — we invite you to take the second.