

# FAKE OR SCRIPTED?



# Fact versus Fiction in Professional Wrestling's "Worked Shoots" from 1982-2022

An Honors Thesis in Communication  
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## DEFINING "KAYFABE"

A pig-Latin-esque way of saying "fake," Kayfabe is the **constructed reality** upon which wrestling storylines are crafted.. Today, it is most frequently used when as part of the phrase <sup>1</sup> "breaking kayfabe."

## DEFINING "WORKED SHOOT"

An event, originating and most commonly found in professional wrestling, that exists in the liminal space between fantasy (**work**) and reality (**shoot**), layering the two in a way that makes it believably viewed as either.<sup>2</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How have worked shoots in wrestling changed over time?

- RQ1A: How has the **form** of worked shoots changed? How have they changed in **presentation**?
- RQ1B: Are worked shoots used in the same **situations** now as they were in the past?
- RQ1C: How has the **purpose** of worked shoots changed?
- RQ1D: What are the **characteristics** of wrestlers who use worked shoots? Have these changed over time? If so, how?

## METHODOLOGY

This study investigated **five worked shoot promos**, one from each of the last five decades, from 1982 to 2022. A **qualitative textual analysis** was conducted for each promo, analyzing each as its own text. Relevant **discourse** pertaining to reactions and response to the worked shoots, from **traditional news publications** as well as **social media** and **wrestling forums** were also analyzed to support the close reading of each promo as a text. The textual analysis was also rooted in a **historical analysis** that examined the promos both over time and as indicators of changing practices in professional wrestling in different key moments.



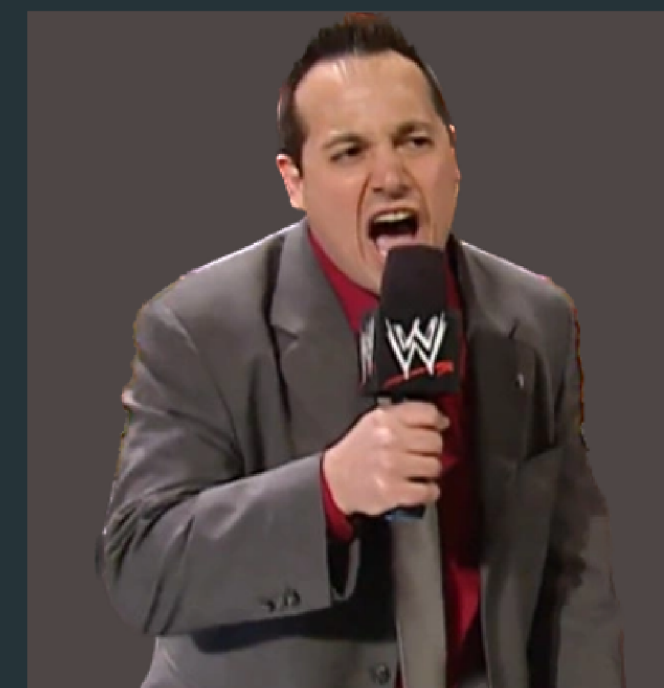
1982

After a tense back-and-forth, Memphis Wrestling star Jerry Lawler slaps comedian Andy Kaufman on *Letterman*.



World Championship Wrestling's Brian Pillman says "I Respect You, Bookerman" mid-match, calling out wrestling's scriptwriters.

1996



2006

WWE Commentator Joey Styles quits on air, expressing frustration with the company's prioritization of spectacle over wrestling.



WWE superstar CM Punk delivers a verbal "pipe bomb," criticizing WWE management and his treatment in the company.

2011



2022

All Elite Wrestling star MJF demands to be fired after insulting fans and AEW CEO Tony Khan for not respecting him.



## FINDINGS



Worked shoots no longer include the same level of physical performance as earlier encounters, instead today they rely heavily on dialogue rather than physicality.



Before social media, worked shoots were used in many situations. Since the 2000s, they've been consistently used as supplemental content on wrestling shows



Worked shoots are intended to generate interest in wrestlers or wrestling shows. This has been their purpose since their earliest uses.



Audiences today know that wrestling is scripted, so worked shoots are less intended to create conversation over *whether* they're real, and instead over *how much* is real.



Worked shoots have been used by performers with grounded, relatable personas. Increasingly, they've been used by "heels," or bad guys in wrestling.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research has implications on research relating to...

- **Parasocial Relationships**, Illusions of face-to-face relationships with performers<sup>3</sup>, and the way they are impacted by **believability** and **reliability** of the performer
- **American Politics** and the notion of "**Alternative Facts**," especially what their intended uses might be.
- **Celebrity Culture**, specifically relating to social media **Influencers** and the personas they create and embody

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