



## **'As Real As It Gets!'** **Producing hyperviolence in mixed martial arts**

**Greg Downey**

*Macquarie University*

Email: [greg.downey@mq.edu.au](mailto:greg.downey@mq.edu.au)

<http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology>

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## Abstract

One of the strongest claims made by proponents of mixed martial arts (MMA) is that the confrontations are more authentic than other types of combat sports or, in the words of one promotion, 'as real as it gets'. Since the advent of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the United States in 1993, the franchise has become one of the most rapidly growing sports in the world, especially since the take-over of the UFC by Zuffa LLC. Twenty years later, the UFC and its imitators have transformed the global understanding of martial arts and established a successful business model for promoting martial arts-based prize fighting. However, on closer examination, the development of the rules for 'no holds barred' fighting demonstrate a desire on the part of the promoters to stage fights that meet audience expectations, including particularly dramatic forms of violence and decisive outcomes. Instead of fighting in some kind of 'de-regulated' space, the UFC and other MMA appear to be 'hyper-violence', a type of stylized unarmed combat, especially telegenic, that obscures the actual effects of that violence on participants, even as it focuses the camera almost obsessively on particularly dramatic violent moments. Ironically, the regulations of 'as real as it gets' fighting seek to produce a confrontation that meets audience expectations, shaped especially by choreographed violence in movies and videogames.

## Contributor Note

Greg Downey is Associate Professor in Anthropology at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He has done fieldwork on capoeira in Brazil and with mixed martial arts fighters in the United States. His first book, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*, offered a phenomenological analysis of the ways that the martial art shaped apprentices' perceptions. He continues to work extensively on the anthropology of martial arts and sport, including ongoing field research on rugby in the Pacific.

## Introduction

On July 25, 2002, Fox Sports television network broadcast a fight between Robbie Lawler and Steve Berger on *The Best Damn Sports Show, Period*. The contest was part of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*, the first time a 'no-holds-barred' fight was carried on a free cable network (rather than broadcast on a pay-per-view basis). The fight ended abruptly in the second round after Lawler dazed Berger with a leaping right hook to the head; when Berger fell, Lawler pounced and pounded his fallen opponent with several hard right punches before the referee, judging that Berger could no longer defend himself, stopped the match. Following enthusiastic audience reception of the fight – *The Best Damn Sports Show, Period* scored its second highest rating to date – Fox Sports increased its commitment to broadcasting the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*, or UFC. The cable network even aired two events, under the title 'As Real As It Gets!' on *Sunday Night Fights*, usually a showcase for boxing.<sup>1</sup> These broadcasts built upon the premise that no-holds-barred fighting or mixed martial arts (MMA) was 'as real as it gets', as close to combat between unarmed humans as allowable under law. The UFC, a deregulated combat sport, is the dominant franchise in the global sport of

MMA, and has gone on to ever greater commercial success since 2002, according to some observers becoming the fastest-growing sport globally.<sup>2</sup>

According to sensationalist publicity for the first UFC tournament, contestants would fight until they are knocked out, the referee stopped the fight, a fighter 'tapped out' and signalled surrender, or one of the fighters was dead. In fact, 'no-holds-barred' never really lived up to that name (which it later sought to shed). From the start, fight promoters banned techniques; even at its most permissive, rules prohibited biting, eye-gouging, and 'fish-hooking', that is, reaching a finger into the cheek, nose, or ears and tearing at the flesh. Strikes to the groin were only briefly allowed. The permissive rules of the sport, however, allowed athletes trained in many sports to compete. Practitioners of different martial arts such as *jujitsu*, *kenpo*, *karate*, and *tae kwon do*; fight-sports such as boxing, Thai kick-boxing, wrestling, and sumo; and even relatively unschooled 'street-fighters' faced each other in matches, creating a hothouse for developing knowledge about hand-to-hand fighting (Downey 2007).

Initially, these deregulated confrontations were supposed to establish which fighting style was the most effective. Over subsequent years, the differences between fighting styles have been arbitrated away: contestants have blended techniques from many arts, as no single fighting style has proved

<sup>1</sup> The Ultimate Fighting Championship would go on to greater commercial success, especially after launching the reality TV show, *The Ultimate Fighter* (*TUF*), on Spike TV in 2005. *TUF* followed a group of aspiring fighters who trained together and competed to earn a contract with the UFC; with Spike, Zuffa produced fourteen seasons of *TUF*. The success of *TUF* led to Zuffa, the company that owns the UFC, eventually signing a lucrative multi-year agreement with Fox. Over the intervening years, Zuffa has acquired many competing promotions, including Pride, its primary Japanese competitor, in 2007, gradually consolidating its commercial hold on professional MMA.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the public relations campaign to win wider acceptance for the sport is a shift in nomenclature from 'no-holds-barred fighting' to 'mixed martial arts' (see also Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). I use both terms in this article. Generally, the term 'ultimate fighting' is not used because the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* is a registered trademark, and dozens of other, less-well-known promotions have similar rules.

consistently dominant in all situations. The name 'mixed martial arts' became a description of fighters' training, not just the sport (Downey 2006).

The U.S. public and international sports audiences responded with both enthusiasm and outrage to the tournaments. The UFC became one of the most successful pay-per-view franchises in the history of the cable industry, but in 1997, amid a widening scandal that included congressional condemnations, cable carriers dropped the sport because of concern about excessive violence (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). Since 1999, the sport's popularity has rebounded in the U.S. with new owners for the UFC and successful campaigns to win official sanction for a re-regulated form of the sport in crucial states for fight sports, such as Nevada, New Jersey, Texas, and California. UFC events have been held in the U.S., Brazil, Canada, the UK, the UAE, and Australia, with current discussions about expanding into India, China, and elsewhere. The UFC now includes women's divisions and is covered by most of the mainstream sports media outlets.

Although combat sports are common across cultures, Michael Poliakoff (1987: 2) suggests that, 'the most interesting thing about fighting as a sport is the form in which various peoples institutionalize it and what they reveal about themselves in so doing'. The development, initial scandal, and eventual success of the UFC have been analysed by figurational sociologists, especially in light of Norbert Elias's model of 'civilizing processes' in European sport. Elias and Dunning (1986) describe sport as a particularly important forum for the cultivation of manners and an outlet for sublimating the aggressive passions. According to

Dunning (1983: 141), sport became, in industrialized societies, 'a social enclave in which specific forms of violence are socially defined as legitimate' (see also Guttman 1986: 168-171). Elias and Dunning (1986: 283) argue that fewer and fewer occupations include opportunities to fight, or even require physical strength. Strength and the capacity for violence no longer have use value, in terms provided by Dennis Kennedy (2001: 280). Instead, muscular virility has only exchange value: 'Male strength ... becomes male display' (Kennedy 201: 280; see also Tasker 1993).<sup>3</sup> Modern sports, according to Riesman and Denney, are distinguished by being more 'abstract', more removed from 'serious' combat (cited in Elias and Dunning 1986: 229).

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<sup>3</sup> Plumbing the relationship between masculinity and aggression in sport thus is particularly incumbent upon theorists of gender relations (see Guttman 1996; Messner 1992; Nelson 1994). Contemporary gender dynamics within sports are in a state of flux as women have begun to participate in what were once exclusively male activities, such as ice hockey, college football, rugby, and boxing. The emergence of no-holds-barred fighting in the United States occurred in the context of increasing commodification of 'men's bodies as objects of desire' (Miller 2001: 11), heightened visibility of women athletes (following the passage of Title IX), and what Jean and John Comaroff (2000: 307) refer to as a 'crisis of masculinity' brought about by economic change. Gorn (1986) and Messner and Sabo (1990, 1994) explore increased interest in violent sports in prior periods of gender anxiety. Some commentators suggest that the UFC, both in the octagonal fighting area and around it, is a space for performing a heightened polarity between male and female: extreme mesomorphic fighters and hourglass-shaped ring girls (see Hirose and Pih 2010). The recent UFC promotion of women's fights (starting in 2013), in spite of the company president's often-repeated vow that they would not include women, signals precisely the sort of gender upheaval that may make sport especially potent for gender symbolism.



Elias and Dunning specifically argue that the development of boxing gloves and prohibitions on wrestling and kicking in boxing were signs of the civilizing process at work (Elias and Dunning 1986: 21). From this perspective, MMA fighting appears to be a de-civilizing downswing, a retrogression to savagery in popular culture, a rejection of what Elias and Dunning describe as boxing's 'civilization' (Sugden 1996). In their thorough analysis of the trajectory of the UFC, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) argue that the organizers of the early UFC events, in fact, engaged in an intentional process of 'de-sportization' for commercial motivations, when promoters exploited the lax regulation of cable broadcasting with transgressive violence.

Cultural critics and opponents of MMA may find this conclusion amenable and argue that the popularity of the UFC is symptomatic of widespread degeneration of social mores. Instead, I propose that the UFC's success is better understood by examining the claims to *reality* made by proponents and how fight interaction was carefully shaped through regulation. Closer analysis reveals in the UFC a craving in the audience for what is treated as an ontologically primordial truth about human interaction – interpersonal violence – and yet this is pitted against the technical demands of fighting with a human body, which often produced events that did not live up to audience expectations.

As producers modified rules to appease critics, a surprising paradox arose: deregulated fighting was simultaneously too violent for critics in the abstract and yet too boring for spectators in the execution. Although some rules were instituted to stave off grievous injury,

others were put into place, I believe, to guide the action toward preferred forms of confrontation: an idealized form of bodily combat that was decisive and appeared 'real'. In other words, the regulation of the UFC since 1993 demonstrates, not simply a concern with limiting injury to fighters and 're-sportization' of MMA, but also a separate and sometimes opposed desire to produce a telegenic, spectacular form of sport combat. The fights were regulated, in part, to produce the *appearance* of authenticity.

This article argues that the regulatory manoeuvring that simultaneously secured approval for the sport of no-holds-barred fighting also demonstrates a striving for what appeared to (especially American) spectators to be 'real' fighting, conforming to their expectations about the nature of interpersonal violence.

Ironically, with all of the scandal about its excessive violence, for many observers and practitioners, the UFC was too constrained or not 'real' enough. The matches that resulted in the most unregulated settings, the earliest tournaments, conformed most poorly with audiences' expectations of what 'real' fighting should look like. Although they started off brief and dramatic, fighters quickly learned within a couple of years how to nullify many of the offensive techniques that were successful initially. Instead of quick, dramatic, explosive exchanges of spectacularly violent blows, deregulated fighting often devolved into long grappling matches. Competitors clung tightly to each other, neutralizing attacks, and eventually surrendering to technically sophisticated, but overly subtle submission holds. Instead of telegenic displays of punching and kicking power, trained participants turned deregulated

fighting into drawn-out wrestling bouts that were difficult to film (and, for many spectators, to appreciate). Well-trained fighters seemed to love the chess-like subtlety of these confrontations. Inexpert audiences and sometimes even commentators, however, could not even understand why combatants had surrendered to excruciating holds or chokes that could barely be seen from the camera's perspective, and they bemoaned the lack of drama (see Downey 2007).

Unregulated fighting turned out to be a lot less spectacular than fans thought 'real' fighting should be. Rather than educate viewers about the nature of fighting (including its indecisiveness in humans), organizers introduced a battery of new rules designed to get fights to conform to an aesthetic of crowd-pleasing violence. Fight regulations were repeatedly rejiggered until MMA matches came into line with the audience's dramatic expectations. Although producers marketed the UFC as being 'As Real As It Gets!', these 'real' confrontations were carefully crafted through constant experimentation with the rules, format, and incentives to better conform to aesthetic standards of what unarmed combat *should* look like given cultural expectations.

These standards, I argue, arise not from actual experience with unarmed confrontation, but from simulated forms of violence: from sports and 'sports-entertainment' (professional wrestling), and from even more fantastic forms of imagined combat, such as cinematic fight choreography and computer-generated video game mayhem. Ironically, in the quest for violent interaction that audiences take to be 'As Real As It Gets!', producers have to bow

to the public's assumptions about the true nature of fighting.

The UFC, like other sorts of 'reality television' programming that emerged especially strongly in the 1990s, revealed less about unmediated reality than it did about popular *expectations* about the nature of reality. For example, the contests in other types of 'reality television' occurred in carefully contrived settings, some verging on mythological forums of challenge: isolation on a 'deserted' island, a 'race' around the world, dozens of suitors competing for a single potential spouse, or, in the case of the UFC, two contestants 'locked' in a 'cage' for battle in which only one could prevail. These scenarios were borrowed whole cloth from cinema fantasy. In all of these cases, media productions produced 'hyperreality', a rarefied format contrived to resemble what viewers assumed reality was 'really' like, shorn of inauthenticity, restraint, or the mundaneness of everyday life. 'Reality TV' presented this over-determined hyperreality back to audiences as existential truth, and when human interaction failed to live up to expectations, 'reality' was manipulated through careful editing, commercial inducements, and other factors. In the end, the organizers of the UFC produced a form of heightened reality or hyperviolence that forces human bodily interaction into a kind of cultural choreography of dramatic confrontation.

### **The birth of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship***

The *Ultimate Fighting Championship* started as a partnership between Robert Meyrowitz of Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG), advertising executive Arthur

Davie, and Rorion Gracie, founder of the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Academy in California.<sup>4</sup> The fights were first broadcast in 1993, when new media technologies and an explosion in the amount of programming time available on new channels led to widespread innovation in televised sports. With costs for broadcast rights soaring and more raw hours of airtime to fill, television executives produced new sports or sport-like programs, what George Sage (1998) termed 'synthetic' or, less charitably, 'trash' sports (see Rinehart 1998). These included celebrity sporting events and contests between professional athletes in activities for which they were not specifically trained.<sup>5</sup>

The UFC was a transplant from Brazil rather than a newly fabricated sport, although the groundwork for its emergence was laid by the increasing permissiveness of kick-boxing and other martial arts contests in 'para-sport' formats (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). Rorion Gracie, one of the original UFC partners, was a member of the Gracie family, a fighting dynasty that had created its own Brazilian variant of jujitsu. The storied Brazilian clan had long fought challenge matches against practitioners of other martial arts. Rorion's uncle Helio, especially, fought in wildly popular *vale tudo* or 'anything goes' matches from 1931 to 1957, some broadcast on national television, that even the Brazilian president attended (see Gentry 2001: 16-20).

Davie and Gracie proposed a 'no-holds-barred' fighting tournament to Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG).

SEG produced pay-per-view programs, such as concerts by Ozzy Osbourne, Barbara Streisand, and the New Kids on the Block. Because content licensing agreements and fees for established performers took such a large share of the proceeds, the profits for these pay-per-view concerts perpetually disappointed the company. SEG executives liked the idea of producing their own original programming with the tournament, especially with unknown athletes who could not make costly demands (Gentry 2001: 26-27). The organizers turned to John Milius, director of the film *Conan the Barbarian*, to help them design a suitable forum for the fights. They considered a pit surrounded by 'Greek structures', a conventional boxing ring, an open ring surrounded by an electrified copper barrier, a Plexiglas wall topped by barbed wire, even a pit encircled by a crocodile-filled moat, before settling on an eight-sided enclosure of six-foot tall chain link fence, 'the Octagon', that has become a UFC trademark (Gentry 2001: 27).

SEG's first *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was held November 12, 1993, in Colorado; the absence of a state boxing commission meant that bare-knuckle fights were not regulated. The initial tournament pitted eight athletes against each other in a single elimination tournament with a \$50,000 grand prize. The victor had to win three fights in a single night. Although the rest of the martial arts world may have been stunned, Rorion Gracie was not surprised when his younger brother Royce, the smallest fighter in the tournament, forced three consecutive opponents to surrender to chokes and tendon-stretching joint locks. (Royce went on to win two more of the first four tournaments.) Rorion had envisioned the tournament as a way to promote his

<sup>4</sup> The Gracies follow the Brazilian spelling of 'jujitsu' as *jiu-jitsu*, even in their American schools.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, I discuss how the proliferation of non-traditional sport was a response to content craving technologies in the 'new economy' of television (Downey 2006).

family's martial art, Gracie Jiu-Jitsu, so confident was he of their techniques, honed in precisely these sorts of deregulated fights in Brazil. The broadcast was a commercial success for SEG, and what had been envisioned as a one-off event became a series. Later UFC broadcasts would be seen by as many as 450,000 households, and prizes climbed to as much as \$150,000 for a single fight, before the company sold the franchise in 2001 under intense political pressure.<sup>6</sup>

Imitators of the UFC sprang up by the dozen in the U.S. and elsewhere (see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). Some of the most successful early events were in Japan where stars could earn substantial endorsement contracts and very large stadium audiences allowed promoters to offer the highest purses. The most ambitious events attracted elite athletes: former Olympic and NCAA wrestlers, champion kick-boxers, and veterans of martial arts competitions in Japan, Brazil, Russia, and Europe. Without regulations to protect them, proponents of the UFC boasted that practitioners of other fight-sports would not last in the Octagon. Journalist David Plotz (1999) enthused: 'Mike Tyson wouldn't last 30 seconds in an ultimate fighting match. When Olympic gold medal wrestler Kevin Johnson came to the UFC, a fighter named Frank Shamrock KO'd him with a submission hold in 16 seconds'. In July

2002, on the eve of the UFC's first production in Europe, a British boxing promoter made disparaging remarks about the event, and UFC President Dana White promptly wagered that none of the promoter's boxers could defeat a UFC fighter, eventually offering \$250,000. (As UFC officials proudly recount, neither Warren nor any of his fighters ever accepted the wager.) Just as in the rhetoric of neo-liberal economic reform, deregulation in combat sports allegedly produced more intense confrontations and thus a more truthful testing ground for athletes. Fighters from protected markets – sports with unreasonable regulation – could not prevail in an unrestricted battleground.

The violence allowed in the UFC's Octagon caused scandal in the United States. Without a doubt, even supporters agree, the first UFC tournament sported a gory, circus-like ambience, in part because the promoters did not realize that they were marketing a series rather than a one-off event. In the opening match of the first UFC, immense sumo wrestler Teli Tuli faced Dutch kickboxing champion, Gerard Gordeau. When Gordeau offered the traditional raised-arm salutation of *savate*, French kickboxing, many spectators thought that the tall tattooed fighter with a shaved head was giving a series of Nazi salutes. Moments later, after briefly tangling with Gordeau, Tuli slipped, and the tall Dutchman kicked him in the mouth. One of Tuli's teeth flew into the audience, and a doctor stopped the fight after only twenty-six seconds; Tuli was more enraged than incapacitated by the kick. The second match ended with one contestant stepping on the other's head, and the *winner* had to pop what looked like a broken jaw back into joint in the locker room. A boxer who saw these fights promptly decided to throw his

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<sup>6</sup> Although the current owner of the UFC, Zuffa LLC, is secretive about fighter contracts, the most highly paid fighters can earn \$4-5 million for a single match (significantly less than the \$32 million earned by made by the boxer Floyd Mayweather for a fight in early 2013). The UFC is notoriously secretive about fighter contracts, but recent court cases have made examples of these contracts public, revealing the degree to which the company tightly controls all aspects of the sport especially in the absence of an athletes' union of any kind (Snowden 2013).



match rather than risk serious injury (see Gentry 2001: 41-44). Supporters attribute the gory early performances and some apparently fixed fights to unprepared participants, uneven matches, inadequate officiating, and insufficient regulation.

For aficionados and critics alike, regulation was the key issue. In 1996, a piece that appeared on CNN's *The American Edge* insisted that 'the unwritten laws' of Ultimate Fighting were relatively few. As a female fan put it, 'You can't bite. You can't gouge. You can't get 'em in the crotch. Other than that, it's a free-for-all' (in 'Ultimate Fight...' 1986).<sup>7</sup> SEG promoter, Campbell McLaren, promoted the first events with unabashed sensationalism: 'There Are No Rules!' served as an (inaccurate) official motto. McLaren's press release for the first competitions announced, sounding like it had been pulled from a B-rate martial arts film, 'Each match will run until there is a designated winner – by means of knock-out, surrender, doctor's intervention, or death' (Gentry 2001: 58). The packaging of tournaments' videotape boasted that it was the 'bloodiest, most barbaric show in history' (a preposterous claim for anyone with even passing familiarity with ancient sports, especially Roman). The organization claimed that the event was banned in forty-nine states, a bit of hype that they no doubt regretted when SEG tried to turn the UFC into a series, and some states did seek to ban no-holds-barred fighting. The lax

regulations and even more sensationalist promotion provoked outcry that the event was savage and cruel.

According to Van Bottenburg and Heilbron, the rise of the UFC was fundamentally a result of shifting relations in the television industry:

No Holds Barred events were produced and distributed by a new type of media entrepreneur who, profiting from the emerging pay-per-view technology, staged events in which the perspective of participants and spectators was subordinated to the perspective of viewers. The vast majority of these viewers were less interested in the technicalities and specifics of fighting disciplines than in the excitement produced by transgressing accepted rules and conventions, thus producing a de-sportization of fighting contests. (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006: 262)

In part because of the style of promotion, local governments moved to prohibit the fights, or at least get them to move elsewhere. A MMA competition on the Kahnawake Native American reservation near Montreal in 1996 resulted in the arrest of nine men for staging an illegal prize fight (McDowell 1996: 35). The state Attorney General and county prosecutor filed a complaint in 1996 alleging that UFC IX in Detroit would violate multiple criminal and licensing statutes. Although Michigan Judge Avern Cohn refused to grant an injunction to stop the event, he did not rule out participants, organizers, or even spectators, being arrested, throwing the event into chaos ('Michigan Judge...' 1996). In 1997, the New York State Boxing Commission handed down last-minute regulations, including

<sup>7</sup> In fact, early tournaments had even fewer rules. After Colorado, some martial artists complained that prohibiting groin strikes advantaged fighters who grappled. Fighters could wrestle in close quarters without fear of being struck in this vulnerable area. Starting with the second UFC tournament, blows to the crotch were briefly allowed, but they did not prove a decisive technique, probably due to the use of metal groin protectors.

prohibitions on chokeholds and kicks below the knees, as well as a requirement to wear protective headgear that effectively banned UFC-style fighting. These regulations forced the organizers to move UFC XII in twenty-four hours. Ticket holders arrived in Niagara Falls to find that three chartered planes had moved 150 fighters, crew, lights, gear, and television equipment to Dothan, Alabama, where surprised bystanders received free tickets, handed out to fill the hastily booked venue (Gentry 2001: 148-150; Ferrell 1997: A1).

Groups like the Parents' Television Council, a watchdog organization that often attacked professional wrestling, pounced on the UFC. Even academic observers singled out no-holds-barred fighting as a high water mark for violence in popular culture (see Goldstein 1998: 225-226). Senator John McCain of Arizona began a campaign against MMA, sending letters to all U.S. governors calling for a ban on 'human cockfighting' (see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). SEG scoured the U.S. for legal venues, moving some fights overseas to Brazil and Japan. Senator McCain's crusade created enormous pressure on cable companies, especially when he became chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, the federal body that oversees the industry. Carriers dropped SEG's pay-per-view program: by 1997, the number of households that could receive the transmissions – the company's 'addressable audience' – shrank from 35 to 7.5 million.

The cable ban and shrinking audience relieved media attention and activist pressure on the UFC. In January 2001, SEG sold the struggling UFC franchise to Nevada-based Zuffa LLC, a corporation linked to casinos and a brewery. The new owners successfully achieved sanction-

ing in Nevada and New Jersey, states whose athletic commissions set standards for fight-sports in the U.S. Cable companies resumed transmitting the UFC in 2001; the new owners sold out venues in Atlantic City, Las Vegas, and London; and the fights appeared on Fox Sports – an astonishing turnaround for a sport that seemed on the verge of being banned.

### **Re-regulating 'no-holds-barred' fighting**

When local governments sought to ban no-holds-barred fighting, they confronted a challenge: it was surprisingly difficult to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate fight-sports. As proponents of no-holds-barred fighting pointed out, most techniques used in the matches were legal in other sports, they just could not all be applied in the same forum. Both punching and wrestling were allowed in varied athletic events, for example, but a professional boxer could not wrestle an adversary to the ground to hit him, nor could a collegiate wrestler suddenly punch an adversary while in a hold. Distinguishing existing, legal sports from no-holds-barred fighting was not easy. For instance, when California legislators barred sports allowing carotid artery chokes, thinking this was a mark of illegitimate fighting, they inadvertently outlawed Olympic judo, in which these chokes are allowed. With both San Francisco and Los Angeles bidding to lure the Summer Olympics, legislators scrambled to find another hallmark to prohibit MMA alone.

In response to outrage, UFC promoters devised rule changes they hoped would stem the tide of public opinion rising against them. They were ultimately successful, but only after years of tinkering. Over the decade, MMA

regulation prohibited techniques that outside critics found most objectionable: butting with the head, hair pulling, throat strikes, attacks to the groin, blows to the back of the head or spine, downward strikes with the elbow, kicking the head of or stomping on a fallen opponent, clawing at the flesh, twisting a finger or toe, and lifting an opponent and slamming him onto his head or neck.<sup>8</sup> The Nevada State Administrative Code for Unarmed Combat lists thirty-one grounds for a foul in a MMA competition.<sup>9</sup> Regulation was the solution to both public relations and alleged safety problems.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One of the most important changes for fighter safety has been the institution of weight classes. Weight classes have diminished the number of obvious fighter mismatches. Of course, weight classes also multiplied the number of title fights for promoters.

<sup>9</sup> Nevada Administrative Code, Chapter 467 – Unarmed Combat. NAC 467.7962 ‘Acts constituting fouls’. Added to the NAC by Athletic Commission by R070-01, effective August 31, 2001. A proposal for modification of the New Jersey State Athletic Code, the regulations on which the Nevada regulations were based, lists 25 grounds for fouls (New Jersey Athletic Control, ‘Mixed Martial Arts Unified Rules of Conduct’, section 13:46-24A.15 ‘Fouls’).

<sup>10</sup> From rates of grievous injury, MMA does not appear to be inherently more dangerous than other violent sports (like boxing, Olympic martial arts, or football) or high-risk events (such as motorcycle racing, hang-gliding, equestrian, or rodeo). More deaths are attributed to boxing than to MMA, but boxers make up a much larger population. Anecdotal evidence and the testimony of ringside doctors suggest that no-holds-barred fighting may be less dangerous than other fight-sports, or even vigorous contact sports like football in which high-speed collision figures. Ancient Greek athletes felt that the Olympic contest *pankration* – a forerunner of no-holds-barred fighting – was less dangerous than boxing. Pankration events were held prior to boxing in the Olympiad so that competitors could participate in both. If boxing was held before pankration, athletes insisted they would be too severely injured to participate in the latter event (see Poliakoff 1987).

Some of these rules may in fact prevent debilitating, permanent injury, such as prohibitions on ‘spiking’ a fighter on his head, twisting of small joints, or gouging the eyes. But other regulations seem to be concessions to appease critics’ aesthetic reservations. For example, the Nevada guidelines ambiguously forbid ‘unsportsmanlike conduct that causes injury’ and rule out such non-lethal attacks as spitting, holding an opponent’s shorts, and using abusive language.

The requirement that fighters wear gloves was particularly important: critics were especially scandalized by bare knuckle punching. Journalist David Plotz (1999) wrote: ‘To a nation accustomed to boxing gloves, [fighting with bare fists] seemed revolting, an invitation to brain damage’. Some commentators saw bare knuckles as a return to pre-sporting barbarity. Bowing to critics, the UFC made lightweight martial arts gloves mandatory in 1997.<sup>11</sup> In their discussion of the ‘civilizing process’ in sport, Elias and Dunning (1986: 21; cf. 137-140) cite

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Comparing the physical stress of professional sports is quite difficult, but as a point of reference, a no-holds-barred fighter may fight in as many as forty or fifty fights in a long professional career, in which he is likely to receive hundreds of blows to the head. In contrast, according to D. Stanley Etizen (1999: 61), the average National Football League player suffers 130,000 full-speed collisions over the course of a seven-year professional career. Michael Messner (1992: 71) reports that former professional football players have a life expectancy 15 years less than non-athlete peers. Among sports writers, rodeo, especially bull riding, is widely considered the most dangerous sport.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike standard boxing gloves, martial arts gloves or grappling gloves allow the fingers and thumb to move freely while still protecting the knuckles and binding the small bones of the hand together for support. In addition, whereas boxing gloves weigh 8 ounces or more, gloves for mixed martial arts competition are generally from 4 to 8 ounces.

the institution of boxing gloves, and padding in those gloves, as a clear example of a 'growth of sensitivity' as 'sport' emerged from Medieval 'pre-sport'. From this perspective, the rise of bare knuckled, no-holds-barred fighting might appear to be a clear example of a 'de-civilizing' outburst, and the requirement to wear gloves as restraint or a 're-sportization' of the UFC (see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2011). A closer examination of the effect of boxing gloves on the dynamics of fighting, however, reveals that they are a much more complex athletic technology (see Downey 2007).

When 1740s boxing champion Jack Broughton first introduced 'mufflers' for the hands, he sought to make the 'manly art' more attractive to delicate gentlemen who might pay him to learn to defend themselves. Broughton's motives were more 'mercenary' than 'civilizing' (in other words, quite similar to the UFC). Likewise, when heavyweight bare-knuckle boxing champion John Sullivan refused to defend his title in bare knuckle fights after 1882, he did so because he found that, with his hands protected and no danger of wrestling injury, he could fight more often, easily dispatch less skilled adversaries, and thereby earn more income (see Gorn 1986: 216-227). The widespread adoption of gloves in boxing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shortened the length of matches because punches were more decisive. Legendary bare-knuckle fights could last hours with participants eventually succumbing to exhaustion and dehydration. In contrast, matches with gloves saw far more punishment delivered to fighters' heads and quicker knockouts.

Bare knuckles, MMA athletes argued, inhibit attacks to the head. Fighters without gloves risk breaking the small bones in their hands when they strike an opponent's skull. The risk of hand injuries, according to some observers, made fights safer. Former UFC star Ken Shamrock explained:

In bare-knuckle fights, one of the most frequent injuries is a broken hand. It is for this reason that the UFC and other reality fighting events are safer than boxing matches. You don't have the constant pounding of a gloved fist on your face or head. Thus, you don't have the resulting brain damage. When fighting bare-knuckle, if you slam your fist again and again into the head or face of your opponent, all you will do is to fracture your hand. Trust me here. I have done this more than once. (Shamrock and Hanner 1997: 153-154)

David 'Tank' Abbott, a devastating puncher, first wore lightweight gloves into the Octagon in 1995 before they were mandated. He did not wear them out of concern for his adversaries. His gloved fists demolished his first opponent in 18 seconds, leaving the downed fighter spasming with a severe concussion. Abbott explained: 'I have been in so many street fights that I know that when I punch you, my hands are going to blow up' (in Gentry 2001: 81). With gloves and careful wrapping to bind the small bones together for support, the fists are better weaponized and protected. Gloved fighters like Abbott could throw harder punches more recklessly with fewer concerns for their own safety. Not surprisingly, Clyde Gentry (155) reports that the percentage of fights that ended in knockouts increased following the



introduction of gloves. The organizers of the UFC no doubt realized that audiences liked to see knockouts, and gloves made them more likely.

Rules within the Octagon thus attempted to balance conflicting demands: to protect fighters from unreasonable injury and thus secure public approval but also to produce appealing violence. Gloves and other regulations are the 'visible evidence' of contentious social negotiation between producers of popular culture, consumers, and concerned, even outraged, third parties with specific ideas about what sorts of violence in sport are acceptable (Mahon 2000).

### **A 'good show': aesthetic demands on fighters**

In spite of fears that the UFC would be unmitigated savagery, fights often turned out to be less dramatic than critics, promoters, and potential fans expected – or hoped. In the very first events, often-unprepared competitors found fights over quickly; matches averaged less than one minute and forty seconds in the first tournament. Because not one lasted through a single five-minute round, rounds and time limits that were in the rules for the first tournament were abolished; they seemed unnecessary. That was soon to change. Fighters discovered effective defensive techniques. Passive, conservative fighting styles prevailed over thrilling, aggressive ones. Within two years, at the 'Ultimate UFC '95', a tournament of previous champions, fights lasted an average of just under ten minutes. The last three contests of the night were indecisive and had to be decided by judges.

Competitors sometimes chose to wait out long fights on their backs holding their adversaries between their legs, waiting for an aggressive opponent to tire. The efficacy of grappling made fights, not only longer, but also a lot less overtly violent than many people expected. Stephen Quadros (1999a) in his discussion of the 'evolving sport' explained in 1999: 'the fights are more competitive yet they lack the unpredictability of the early days. Wildness and ignorance have yielded to finesse and strategy, and the results aren't always exciting'. Growing expertise among fighters unexpectedly diminished the drama of the confrontations. SEG executives were mortified, and fans grew restless with the lack of obvious violence.

A match in Japan between two stars of the no-holds-barred world, Royce Gracie and Kazushi Sakuraba, lasted *over an hour-and-a-half* before Gracie's corner threw in the towel, conceding defeat. Rorion Gracie expected this sort of long, drawn-out affair when the UFC started. When he was fifty, Rorion's father, Helio, fought a former student in Rio de Janeiro for almost *four hours* before Gracie's corner surrendered (Peligro 2004). But Brazilian and Japanese audiences were more forgiving of this type of prolonged grappling than audiences in the U.S.

At UFC VII in Tulsa, the championship match between Royce Gracie and Dan 'The Beast' Severn lasted sixteen minutes. Unfortunately for home viewers, only fourteen minutes remained before the show's air-time expired. The broadcast blinked off in around a quarter-million homes just before Gracie choked Severn until he surrendered. SEG was inundated with complaints and forced to pay out refunds. Subsequently, three other UFC events have run over their broadcast time limits, costing the

SEG dearly in revenue and lost audience support. The UFC instituted fixed time limits on all matches, and judges' decisions in the case of time expiring in 1995. Fans still dislike judges' decisions and prefer that 'fighters finish' the matches, ending with knockout, referee's stoppage, or submission, but some decision is better than none, especially given time limits on broadcasts.

The problem, however, is not simply a technological one; human fighting, especially in a controlled setting between highly trained individuals, turns out to be indecisive in many cases. Many injuries in street fights arise more from falling onto very hard surfaces or objects and not because of the enormous striking power of the human body. Professional wrestling of the 1920s and 1930s suffered from the same 'defect' as these early MMA matches, according to Thomas Henricks (1974: 178), until promoters, entrepreneurs, and vaudevillians transformed the sport into a kind of muscle theatre. Early wrestling matches, before the development of scripted choreography, could go on for up to five hours, with a single hold being maintained for as long as 50 minutes. The human body turns out to be quite resilient, and our resources for hurting each other – especially if we forego biting in close quarters – often inadequate against defensive techniques (Downey 2007).

The finesse and strategy, especially between expert grapplers, did not even look like fighting to commentators such as David Plotz: 'Instead of being carnivals of gore, UFC fights looked strangely like... sex. Almost all fights ended on the ground, one man mounting the other in missionary position, the pair of them wiggling mysteriously along the canvas for five, 10, even 30 minutes' (1999,

ellipses in the original). John Marks in *U.S. News & World Report* suggested: 'Most of the time, the sport looks less like a genuine street brawl than an unappetizing X-rated film – beefy men committing banal acts under hot lights' (Marks 1997: 46). In a column entitled 'Sodom, Gomorrah and the UFC', ESPN writer Bill Simons (2002) discussed what he considered the 'worst kind' of UFC matches: 'not enough punching, too much time spent wrestling on the ground, waaaaaaaaaay [sic] too many uncomfortable positions involving a guy on his back with his legs up'. Simons continued from his vantage point at the nadir of the sport's popularity: 'If you're looking for "Reasons why the UFC may never make it", start right here: Guys vigorously rolling around on other guys. Never really a crowd-pleaser. They need to encourage more kicking, more punching and less of the other, um, stuff. Not that there's anything wrong with that'. The discomfort, however ironic and self-conscious, is palpable.

Even when a fighter is trying to bludgeon another in the head or choke his adversary underneath him, intimate contact between men, especially the torso-to-torso horizontal embrace of the defensive 'guard' position, creates what David Rowe (1999: 137) calls a 'semiotic vulnerability' to readings as sexual. Specialty publications shared among the sport's aficionados never comment on the potential erotic readings of the interaction. As Rowe (135) suggests, expert, (presumed) heterosexual male commentators officially view 'the male sports body in technical rather than aesthetic or erotic terms'. Outside critics and non-expert observers, in contrast, inevitably read sexual connotations into the interaction, just as fans attending the fights do. Shouts such as 'Get a room!' and 'Stop fuckin' and hit him!' greeted

any prolonged periods of wrestling at matches I attended. The extraordinary stigma placed on close corporeal interaction between men overrode the violence in these interactions. In order to become widely popular, critics contended, mixed martial arts competitions must become unambiguously non-sexual. For those who are most ready to read erotic connotations into homosocial contact, this meant that violence must be visited on the athlete's body from a distance.

For something seemingly so 'primitive' (Simmons 2002), the extensive grappling in no-holds-barred fighting turned out to be surprisingly difficult to understand, let alone appreciate. David Plotz (1999) explained: without rules to encourage striking, 'There were few spectacular knockouts. The referee ... stopped many bouts, and in most others, fighters "tapped out", surrendering to mild-looking but agonizing chokes and joint locks. It was not barbarism. It was science'. Even the early announcers struggled to describe what they were seeing. They puzzled aloud during the first tournament, for example, when Ken Shamrock surrendered in a fight. Only after several replays of the submission were announcers able to discern that Royce Gracie, his adversary, had pulled the lapel of his own heavy fabric *gi*, the traditional jujitsu uniform, across Shamrock's windpipe like a garrote. Promoters and announcers struggled to educate the public about the 'science' of fighting, hoping that their audience could be trained to appreciate the sophisticated physicality and tactics of prolonged grappling.

UFC officials also worried that grappling matches were difficult to film in compelling ways. Journalist Edward Ericson (2001) wrote, 'With two fighters struggling on the ground, a spectator

even three or four rows back finds it hard to follow the action. The chants of "boring" can rise up as quickly as a kick boxer's knee'. At UFC 39, a match that one Internet columnist called the 'Fight of the Month' was jeered by spectators in the auditorium. The action, an intense but subtle struggle for position against the fence, did not translate well into visual spectacle; on television, the fight was more engaging. Although the fights were labelled 'no-holds-barred', organizers instituted rules to cut down on the number of 'holds' and make grappling a less attractive strategy. Two key changes were instituted: the referee could separate fighters and 'stand them up' for 'inactivity', and the matches were divided into five-minute rounds. Ken Shamrock explained: 'Rounds make it more exciting for the fans and make sure that the fighters keep on fighting.... Without standups and breakages, it becomes pretty boring for the fans, although the fighters, by and large, seem to like it' (in Falcon 2000).<sup>12</sup> Even if a fighter was tackled to the ground and could not get loose, the referee might decide that the pair was 'inactive' or a round could end.

One of the dangers of time limits, however, was that matches could go the distance without a clear winner. As fighting techniques improved, stalemates became increasingly common. Competitors stopped making some of the more obvious tactical errors that led to quick submissions in early fights and became so well conditioned that they

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<sup>12</sup> Rounds were also a concession to television. Breaks between rounds provided intervals to replay the most spectacular action, allowing producers to heighten the sense of drama. Likewise, frequent breaks in professional football were concessions to television networks wishing to sell time during these breaks to advertisers (see Barnett 1990; Gruneau 1989; and Rowe 1999: 154-155).

could endure lengthy bouts. During UFC 33, held in 2001, six of the eight matches had to be decided by judges, an outcome that Zuffa officials thought unacceptable. Fans and fighters alike shared a preference for decisive conclusions.

Even with the shortened format, rounds and other rule changes, fighters still spent too much time grappling, in the opinion of many observers. Brazilian kick-boxer Vanderlai 'the Axe Murderer' Silva, a champion in the premier Japanese no-holds-barred promotion, *Pride FC*, suggested in an interview:

NHB [no-holds-barred fighting] now is the sport of the new millennium, the guy that comes in and goes straight for the opponent's legs [to grapple]... this is not what people want to see anymore. People want to see the guy staring, punching, kicking the other guy's face, and kneeing the face.... I believe that if every fight has this kind of action, NHB will pay much better purses, will have many more athletes, and then I think it'll really become professional and a real show. (in Alonso 2001: 22)

Silva, like many in no-holds-barred fighting, believes that fans desire a particular form of violence: specifically, knees, kicks, and punches to the face and head. These forms of violence are a 'real show', a telegenic, arms- or legs-distance projection of physical force to the head, unambiguously coded as aggressive. Unlike strikes to the body that may not have an obvious effect, blows to the head snap it back, which makes for vivid highlight tapes. Video loops that play between fights in the arena repeatedly show the most

spectacular blows and knockouts in slow motion. Fighters' faces contort and go slack, and their legs crumple beneath them repeatedly as video loops of the same devastating punches and explosive kicks play over and over again on mammoth screens.

Not only were rules rewritten to enhance the commercial appeal of the product, pressures external to the Octagon were applied to the fighters to make them more aggressive inside it. The outspoken Vanderlai Silva further explained:

For sure, I think that if it was under the old rules I wouldn't have won so quickly, and the fights are really getting more aggressive, there are more KOs [knockouts] now. I think that the public pays to see a knockout, to see somebody falling, it doesn't matter whom. I enter the ring disposed to KO or to be KO'ed. If I fall, and I fall in a good fight, I believe I would be giving a spectacle even when I'm falling! So I really go to punch, and I hope that many more people will accept to trade [punches] so that the spectacle will be better for everybody, for us and for the public. (in Alonso 2001: 22)

Promoters encourage this increasingly reckless 'KO or be KO-ed' approach to fights through economic inducements, translating public desire into private incentive. A public relations executive at Zuffa explained that, if a fighter put on a 'good show' – he was aggressive and exciting to watch – he would be invited back even if he lost. If a fighter was victorious but uninteresting to watch, he might not get his contract renewed. According to that company representative, most UFC fighters initially sign a contract for three fights, usually over the



course of a year, and only then move from the lower paid 'undercard' fights early in the night to more lucrative 'main events' that are part of the pay-per-view broadcast. With preliminary bouts now worth less than \$10,000 and championship fights over \$100,000, and in some cases potentially over \$1 million, fighters have to look beyond the exigencies of any one confrontation to position themselves for greater future earnings. Recognizing that they are being judged by aesthetic as well as pragmatic considerations – it is not enough simply to win, one must also deliver a thrilling confrontation, regardless of the outcome – fighters modify their tactics inside, and their self-presentation outside, of the Octagon.

The UFC is not the only sport to be shaped by the demands of television (see Klatell and Marcus 1988). For example, hard-punching boxers replaced the more technical bobbing and weaving style of earlier fighters during the heyday of televised boxing. The defensive tactics of fighting dominant in the early twentieth century looked almost effete on a small screen. Fans demanded sluggers who photographed well in the new medium, throwing punches with enough power to carry through the cathode-ray tube (see Rader 1984: 43-44). In another example, Steven Barnett (1990) describes how American football's pacing, tactical complexity, and photogenic violence, as well as the National Football League's willingness to respond to the exigencies of television, helped make it the pre-eminent spectator sport in the United States. The sport's suitability for television was not inherent but the result of a long history of accommodation on the part of both the football league and television broadcasters. Promoters of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*, like organizers of

the National Football League and boxing promoters, bent rules and framed the fights with the trappings of spectacle to increase the appeal of the sport. However, in the case of MMA, producers faced an additional challenge: any changes could not undermine the framing of fights as 'real'.

### **'As Real As It Gets!'**

The promotion of the UFC as 'As Real As It Gets!' suggests a number of questions: what is the elusive 'real' to which they're referring, and why is it important to be as close to it as possible? I would argue that anxiety about the 'reality' of sport is precipitated by some of the same forces that have led to a broader discussion of existential authenticity in popular culture: the intertwining of mass-mediated fantasy with quotidian experience. If anything, the everyday and familiar can seem over-shadowed by powerful images of other 'realities' on television and other media.

Ambivalence about the 'reality' of contemporary life and persuasive fictions that seem more vivid or authentic have been discussed under a number of rubrics, including the 'simulacra' (Baudrillard 1994; Benjamin 1969), the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1983), 'hyperreality' (Eco 1986), and 'virtualism' (Carrier 1998). Sean (1999: 340) argues that contemporary anxieties about 'reality status' arise around performances or representations that are 'otherwise regarded as ontologically inaccessible to the perceiver', and yet of fundamental importance to us. I believe that the claims to 'reality' by the promoters of the UFC are especially emphatic, but also elusive (not 'real' but just 'as real as it

gets') because the promoters are offering a form of interpersonal violence that is typically 'inaccessible', but believed by Americans to be an essential dimension of life.

The UFC emerged within a broader aesthetic movement in contemporary North American media, especially television: an attempt to frame a range of programs as 'reality'. The diverse genre of 'reality television', however, does not adhere to the realist aesthetic of television journalism or documentary production, nor is it simply a recasting of talk-shows or game-shows. 'Reality television' programs create enclosed, artificial environments – dating contests, castaway island competitions, forced sequestration of participants, singing auditions, stunt tournaments – in which non-actors – 'real' people – typically vie for prizes. Unlike older television game-shows, participants are usually forced to live together and the camera (and the audience, vicariously) pries into the personal lives and the social drama among participants. Participants are encouraged to step outside the flow of the events on occasion and comment introspectively on what they are (were) thinking or feeling, giving audience members access to their emotional inner lives. The current wave of reality television already has its own well-established aesthetic conventions for asserting sincerity, including a particular visual style. Overall, a persistent stream of ontological questioning seems to hover over these programs, as if the 'truth' about people might somehow emerge from these laboratories of overheated emotion and high stakes interpersonal politicking.

Promoters and critics point to the truthfulness of the UFC as the fundamental quality of the competition,

usually contrasted with openly acknowledged artifice in professional wrestling or strictly constrained, and therefore less 'real', violence in boxing and other fight sports. As opposed to professional wrestling, the UFC was not fixed; the outcome of matches, unpredictable. The decreased regulation of MMA relative to other fight-sports such as boxing, judo, or Olympic wrestling, allegedly make the UFC closer to a 'real' fight. Promoters see convincing potential viewers of the value and integrity of this 'real' fighting as their primary challenge and greatest selling point.

The most obvious point of comparison for the UFC is professional wrestling. During the 1990s, when the UFC was striving for credibility, one of the most influential promoters of popular images of hand-to-hand combat was the World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., or 'the WWE'. The WWE was an extremely profitable franchise for its owner, Vince McMahon. Matches in the WWE, however, were 'worked'; they had pre-determined outcomes. In the WWE, fighters feigned injury, and spectacular athletic techniques demanded collusion between adversaries for their dramatic effect. The UFC specifically promoted its brand of sport-fighting as an alternative to professional wrestling; whereas the WWE openly acknowledged that it was 'fake', the UFC was 'real'.<sup>13</sup>

Although professional wrestling matches had long been 'worked', probably since the 1920s, Benjamin Rader argues that 'television encouraged the players to engage in even more extravagant showmanship' (1984: 37). Especially in

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<sup>13</sup> One reason that McMahon, the owner of the WWE, acknowledged that the events were staged 'sports entertainment', a term he coined, was so that the events would not fall under the sports regulatory bodies in several states.

the late 1990s, as the WWE struggled to overcome upstart rival World Championship Wrestling, a Ted Turner-sponsored franchise, spectacular action and sexuality in its broadcasts allegedly increased, much to the consternation of television watchdog organizations. The WWE's writers decreased the amount of each broadcast dedicated to action in the ring, leaving more time in each broadcast to develop on-going plotlines that found the wrestlers' fictitious personas, and even management (including McMahon family members), involved in complicated rivalries, intrigues, love triangles, and vicious betrayals. The changes led to soaring Nielsen ratings (and eventually allowed McMahon to buy the WCW in 2001). The WWE also improved the production qualities of events, adding more cameras, dazzling pyrotechnics, elaborate entrances for the wrestlers with deafening signature music, and 'backstage' action carried on huge video screens to the audience in the arena.

Observers and critics commonly assert that professional wrestling has become 'more violent' over time, especially since the mid-1990s (e.g., Maguire 2000). 'Violence', however, is no uniform, singular entity, and understanding its variety is essential to capturing the complex relationship between media, sport, and cultural aesthetics. For example, from my admittedly unsystematic observations, the amount of bloodletting seems to have decreased in the WWE. Perhaps because the gruelling demands of the organization's production and travel schedules are incompatible with the time needed to recover from intentional cutting, fighters no longer use razors to cut their foreheads, and to produce abundant bleeding, as frequently as they did in earlier matches. In this sense, violence is

diminished. Although the time spent fighting in the ring has decreased, violence has leaked from this front stage area. Now, staged combat breaks out in a range of adjacent, 'backstage' spaces: dressing areas, parking lots, stadium corridors, hospital rooms, and even the McMahons' home – roving cameras and in-house projection screens expand the zone for spectacular violence. Although parents' groups may object to the inclusion of assault with everyday objects, attempted vehicular homicide, attacks on one's employers, even intra-familial back-stabbing (trust the WWE to make it literal), this 'heightening' of violence in the broadcasts paradoxically accentuates the fantastic quality of the entire performance. Some theorists argue that because the violence of the WWE is framed as theatre of the absurd it is palatable to observers. Perhaps the most intriguing parallel to developments in no-holds-barred fighting, however, is that the time spent in wrestling headlocks and chokeholds seems to have decreased. WWE wrestlers now engage in more aerial attacks, dramatic strikes, bounces off the ropes, throws, and combat with improvised weapons such as folding chairs and ladders. The aesthetic of violence within professional wrestling has moved away from grappling toward a greater emphasis on blows delivered from a distance.

To be successful, a sporting event cannot merely be action filled; it must also form a meaningful, 'narrativized construction, with twists and turns in the plot, heroes and villains', writes David Rowe (1999: 146; cf. Fiske 1987: 128-129). Without a history of rivalries or regional loyalties like city-based sports teams, creating a mythology for the UFC posed thorny problems. The effort to increase drama in the UFC raised a danger touched on

by Richard Rinehart in his study of non-mainstream sports:

Sport has come to be signified by the dramatic: anything less (*or more*) than a dramatic contest is less-than-sport. Thus, sport promoters do everything in their power to create a dramatic tension, even if one does not exist. The thinking is that the audience will clamor for more dramatic contests. (Rinehart 1998: 33; emphasis added)

Promoters risked stepping over a fine line that made 'more' than a dramatic contest, as Rinehart puts it, 'less-than-sport', a boundary represented concretely, for fans and promoters alike, by the hyperbole of professional wrestling.

Even though the promoters of no-holds-barred fighting explicitly rejected the theatricality of the WWE, its production qualities served as a model for UFC events. Starting with the third tournament, the UFC adopted professional wrestling-style promotion, marketing personal grudges and individual fighters, and downplayed the stylistic rivalries that were the central focus of the first tournament. UFC executives realized that audience interest was generated by memorable athletes' personalities. Participants were included as much for their stage presence as for their fighting credentials. Former gang member and born-again Christian Kimo Leopoldo, sporting abundant tattoos (including the word 'Jesus' in large letters on his stomach), and 6' 8", allegedly 616-pound sumo wrestler, Emmanuel Yarbrough, added to the spectacular profile of participants. One event even featured a fighter who had surgically implanted fangs.

Selective borrowing from professional wrestling was difficult for the producers to control, however. Kimo, the tattooed Christian, for example, came out for his first fight wearing a hood and carrying a large wooden cross on his back; when he got to the Octagon, he dropped to his knees in prayer in front of the whole stadium. According to David Isaacs, SEG executives were mortified: 'People were buying reality, and we didn't want the taint of sports entertainment. We wouldn't have let something like that go because we didn't want people to think that we were professional wrestling' (in Gentry 2001: 63).

For many fans and promoters, the theatricality of wrestling is both compelling and repulsive; although they look to the WWE for a model of production quality and professionalism in some regards, they also see the sports-entertainment as a cautionary tale about the dangers of inauthenticity. On the one hand, a public relations official at Zuffa revealed that they hired the same pyrotechnics company used by the WWE to create exciting entrances for fighters with flash pots, lasers, and pounding music synchronized to video effects. On the other hand, Zuffa officials, fighters, and fans are adamant that the similarities with wrestling end when the referee shouts, 'Let's get it on!' to start a fight. Several UFC stars tried to make the leap to professional wrestling, unanimously saying that the lure of parlaying fame earned in 'real' fighting into greater financial reward in the theatre of fantastic violence was too great to pass up. An online dialogue among UFC fans revolves around the artificiality of theatrical devices to increase tension, the necessity of producing an entertaining 'show' to gain mainstream acceptance, and concerns about the potential corrosive effects of sports-



entertainment-style production qualities on the legitimacy of MMA.

The competitors themselves have to adapt to the demands of the medium. A spokesman for Zuffa told me that UFC athletes, with few exceptions, are reserved and disciplined, well suited to the extraordinary demands that training places on them. These same traits pose challenges for the marketing side of the industry, which places a premium on larger-than-life personalities. Some fans suggest that media-genic athletes are promoted at the expense of less camera-friendly peers; fans discuss both the technical competence and performance flair of different fighters, recognizing that, although the two are distinct, both are essential to an athlete's long-term success. Fighters have even been encouraged to see acting and speech coaches, especially as they are now called upon to be public relations ambassadors or colour commentators during fights.

### **The street fight as the 'real'**

Underlying these anxieties about the authenticity of no-holds-barred fighting lurks another set of assumptions about 'real' fighting. For, if professional wrestling is clearly 'fake', the UFC only claims that it is 'As Real As It Gets!', not 'real' in an unqualified sense. Something must lie beyond this de-regulated form of hand-to-hand combat, even if it is only an imagined possibility.

Shocked first-time observers may not think anything lies beyond the pale of the Octagon and object strongly to the 'reality' of the fighting. When an aide to Senator John McCain explained what was so objectionable about the UFC, for

example, he said: '[The UFC] was something that offended and appalled Sen. McCain.... This is *real violence*. It's not Arnold Schwarzenegger shooting somebody in a movie with a machine gun' (in Nesbitt 1997: C1, emphasis added). For this aide the production of virtual hyperviolence (cinematic mass murder) differed categorically from 'real violence' (bare-fisted punching with visible consequences and danger to the assailant). Of course, the aide's comments also ignored the degree of 'real' violence in other sports. As the aide continued: the UFC 'will either end up in a Third World country, or they will clean up their act'.

From its very onset, however, commentators in the martial arts community pointed out that fighting in the Octagon, in fact, was not 'real' in the sense of being limitless. Stephen Quadros, editor of *FightSport* magazine, drew attention to this gap: "Reality combat" is one tag that has been used quite a bit, and "no-rules fighting" is another. In reality, neither of those names is truly accurate' (Quadros 1999b). Although Quadros cites regulations against kicking a fallen adversary and head butting, anthropologist Paul Silverstein (personal communication) pointed out that even more subtle inhibitions prevented unlimited violence in the UFC. Not until the fourth tournament, for example, did someone take full advantage of groin strikes.

Viewers seemed to assume that, without rules, fighters would naturally generate all possible modes of damaging another human being in unarmed combat; in fact, techniques had to be learned or discovered (Downey 2007). Only years after no-holds-barred fighting began, for example, did a fighter win a match by thinking to press his chin against an opponent's closed eye; this excruciatingly

painful technique was subsequently banned by an amendment to the rule against eye gouging.

Some competitors argued vociferously that even the minimal rules tipped the balance in favour of strategies that might not prevail in a 'real' fight, undermining the veracity of the confrontations. 'Tank' Abbott, for example, dismissed the outcomes of many matches by comparing them to his experience fighting in non-sports setting:

I been fighting all my life, not like these other guys. They're just poseurs, especially the jujitsu guys. I mean, in a bar fight, I'd rip their eyes out. You can't lay on your back like a bitch in a bar fight. You get hit with a bottle.... I wish bar fighting was legal. (in Kriegel 1996: 94)

Johnny Rhodes, veteran of the second UFC tournament, was disappointed by the rules after his loss in the tournament: 'If I would have gotten you in a lock and you would have put your teeth into me, I would have to let you go. That's how I expected it to be because it said no rules' (in Gentry 2001: 235). Both Abbott and Rhodes suggest that early victories by grapplers were a product of the *gap* between the UFC and really 'real' fighting in bars or other settings. Similarly, Ken Shamrock, himself an expert in submission techniques, described in an interview that using a ground fighting technique 'may be kind of artful and interesting to martial arts students in a controlled ring situation', but that same technique might 'run into some real life time limitations' (in Falcon 2000). In 'real life', the pavement had sharp edges or was covered in broken glass, one's adversary had friends willing to kick a prone fighter in the head, and

improvised weapons were always close at hand. 'Real life', these men assert, is a bar fight or street brawl.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, the more the UFC is supposed to be a legitimate 'sport', the less willing the franchise's administrators are to countenance athletes fighting outside the Octagon. The promoters insist that the fenced space is distinct from lawless brawling at the same time that UFC matches draw credibility from their proximity to this mythic activity. Following UFC 38 in The Royal Albert Hall, Zuffa executives tried to stifle news that an after-hours melee had broken out among UFC-contracted fighters. Zuffa President Dana White was emphatic: 'We get enough negative press without a bunch of jackasses getting into a fist fight at the after-party' (in Hunt 2002). In order to maintain its tenuous hold on respectability, the 'As Real As It Gets!' UFC could not be associated with unregulated extracurricular fighting although it was marketed as deregulated sport fighting.

### Virtualism and the recycling of the representation

The current vogue of 'reality television' may be a response to a creeping sense of inauthenticity in popular culture, a sign that consumers demand more integrity in their entertainment. 'Reality television', however, is not an unmediated window on daily life. The 'reality' involved, in the words of John Fiske,

<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, Abbott, renowned for his sense of humor as well as his punching power, suggested that prohibitions on drinking before a fight were also inappropriate because most street fights occur between intoxicated participants.

arises in part from aesthetic rules, the adherence to 'the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed' (Fiske 1987: 21). Reality television in all of its various forms – voyeuristic game shows, live-in serial dramas, and long-duration contests – purports to puncture the artificiality of television, just as it pushes new standards for simulation: innovative codes for televisual veracity including camera techniques, framing gestures, and staging conventions. These create a sense of heightened realism over other genres of television. These aesthetic gestures depend on their context and use, the intertextually-generated historical moment, to create an appearance of authenticity (see Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1999). For example, 'shaky-cam' footage only conveys 'reality' to viewers who understand its aesthetic conventions. Contemporary televisual 'reality' likely will not look so veracious as these aesthetic conventions change over time. Professional wrestling broadcasts, for example, have adopted many of the conventions of contemporary 'TV verité'; jumpy hand-held camera work, 'backstage' footage, and censored obscenities all lend gravitas to hyper-violent fantasy, all the more disorienting because these techniques are in the service of such obvious and outsized fabrications.

Concern about inauthenticity in social life in the context of commercialization and mechanical reproduction characterizes both popular consciousness and a wide swath of cultural studies. Critical discussions of eroding authenticity in the quotidian often build upon the ideas of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972), Jean Baudrillard (1994), Walter Benjamin (1969), Guy Debord (1983), and Umberto Eco (1986). Jean Baudrillard (1994: 12-13), for example, takes

Disneyland as a symbol of 'hyperreality': the corporate production of fantasy that becomes so indistinguishable from reality that it starts to undermine consumers' ability to distinguish fact from fantasy (c.f., Mitchell 1992; Sherry et al. 2001). In anthropological research, discussion of authenticity has been concentrated in studies of art, museums, folk performances, tourism, and the 'invention of tradition', sometimes drawing on earlier concerns about cultural inauthenticity in our field (e.g., Handler and Saxton 1988; MacCannell 1973; Sapir 1949; Stanley 1998; Wang 1999).

Although postmodern writings have been quite rightly criticized for treating American popular culture as a nightmare projection of Continental imagination (see Bruner 1994), authors like Eco and Baudrillard, nevertheless, provide a set of concepts useful for discussing the anxieties surrounding authenticity in a context of sophisticated media production. Jean Baudrillard, for example, suggests that contemporary fascination with the elusive 'real' in mass media is a utopian impulse:

The imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by the reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object. (Baudrillard 1994: 122-123)

Baudrillard may apply his own concepts too broadly, projecting one sort of conflicted desire across the vast range of

popular culture, but he does capture a longing that resonates with the audience's discussion of the UFC: a desire for the real that one believes to be unattainable.

The UFC, like other reality television shows, does not simply present the tedium of everyday experience, like some unblinking surveillance camera on the average. Rather, the events attempt to find and refine a purer truth: a moment of primordial human emotion or conflict. Dating reality shows, for example, seem to suggest that competition for the hand of a potential mate – especially if she is a beauty queen or he is a millionaire – reveals some profound truth about human interaction. Contest programs suggest that survivalist obstacle courses, stunts or contrived tests of endurance – or votes to eliminate another member of the group – are a form of competition that demonstrates who would have the qualities necessary to be a 'survivor'.

Journalist Bill Simmons (2002), for example, in his lurid account of UFC 39, manifests this longing when he writes appreciatively of the UFC: 'Nobody takes a night off, everyone is fighting for his life, and there's a more primitive feel to the matches than you get from any other sport. It's the closest we'll ever get in real life to the fight scene in "Escape from New York"' (Simmons 2002). Ironically, the utopian ideal that 'reality fighting' in the UFC approaches for Simmons is actually celluloid fantasy, held out as the standard against which actual sports are measured. When the UFC promises fighting 'As Real As It Gets!', it is both promotion and apology: Sorry, guys, this is the best they'll let us give you.

Baudrillard referred to this sort of process as the 'precession of simulacra'; virtual simulations of fighting precede the UFC and act as a guiding epitome

that the UFC must then strive to attain. James Carrier discussed a similar phenomenon, which he labelled 'virtualism', in relation to economics. According to Carrier (1998: 2), virtualism in economic thinking occurs 'when people take [a] virtual reality to be not just a parsimonious description of what is really happening, but a prescriptive of what the world ought to be; when, that is, they seek to make the world conform to their virtual vision'. Fighter Vanderlai Silva exhibits a similar drive to make the physical 'real' conform to the virtual in the following discussion of no-holds-barred fighting:

People want to see trading [punches], knees to the face; they want to see blood and that's why I don't care when I bleed. I believe that you have to take some bombs too, it's part of the show. It makes the fight exciting. I don't mind taking punches, I don't mind cutting my face, *I believe that the tendency is to become more real*, to win an even bigger public. (Alonso 2001: 20, emphasis added)

As the fights conform better to the desires of the audience – a desire for 'bombs' and 'blood' and 'trade' in brutality, no matter if these tactics are actually the most effective – the 'tendency is to become more real', according to Silva.

The choice of the term 'virtualism' is even more fortuitous in the case of the UFC than in the economic scenarios discussed by James Carrier because some of the models held as archetypes for 'reality fighting' are, in fact, 'virtual reality': sensory immersion in a darkened theatre or video games. Regulations are written, rounds instituted, gloves



provided, and referees allowed to intervene so that the fighting will look as it ought to, judged according to expectations created by Hollywood and video games.

The UFC, however, has entered a forest of mirrors as combat between flesh-and-blood fighters, already shaped by virtualist aesthetics, finds itself recycled back into the virtual realm that serves as its model. UFC veterans have appeared in several action films where their presence and fighting ability lend authenticity to the choreographed *mêlées*; some appeared in the HBO series *Oz*, where they helped to stage a 'realistic' prison riot (as if a prison riot would resemble MMA). The UFC has also spawned several video games that have garnered industry awards and significant sales. Positive on-line reviews and player comments cite the games' 'realism' as their strongest selling point. One reviewer recommends to the uninitiated – those unfamiliar with the UFC – that they view a UFC event to get an idea of what the first event was like. But, he writes:

Of course you could just pick up a copy of *UFC Tapout* [the game] and get as realistic of a representation as you could hope for. Everything about *Tapout* is authentic, from the presentation of the game to the look of the combatants matches the actual event flawlessly. Fighter models are in fact some of the most realistic to grace a console fighter ever.... The moves that these fighters execute are video-captured perfectly, giving each hit cringe-inducing realism. This isn't a game for the faint of heart. Brutal forearms slam into opponents' faces, and if you happen to be on the receiving end of punches to

the back of the head, watch out. It's not over the top violent, it's brutally realistic. I'm not sure which is worse. (Doug 2002)

Action in the UFC Octagon, shaped by aesthetic ideals of combat themselves born of movies and video games, has become an industry standard of the 'brutally realistic' in the market for video games. Sensationalist advertising copy for the second UFC-based game created by Crave Entertainment elided the difference between the 'real' and the 'virtual' even more enthusiastically: '25 modern day gladiators. Be the last man standing. Real fighters. Real fighting. *UFC Throwdown*'. Reviewers point out that the newest versions of the game have 'real' fighters available: virtual avatars designed to capture not only the appearance of well-known fighters from the UFC, but also their characteristic physical strengths and technical skills. The idea, of course, is that a player at home takes control of one 'real' fighter, a virtual combatant produced through 'video-capture' and digital simulation technologies of a living, breathing UFC veteran, and therefore the fighting is 'real'.<sup>15</sup>

Like most advertising copy, the promotional materials verge on the absurd, but the virtualist distortions become especially heightened as actual UFC fighters and their virtual counterparts become enmeshed in cross-

<sup>15</sup> In order to appreciate fully who the virtual 'you' is in the Crave games, however, the player must be able to see his or her virtual manifestation, so the game cannot be a true 'first person' fight game. That is, the graphics cannot generate a video representation of what the virtual fighter would see from his own eyes. Instead, video game players find themselves watching their virtual avatars over the avatars' computer-generated shoulders during their digital (that is, making use of the thumb and fingers) athletics.

promotions between Zuffa and game companies like Crave Entertainment. Before one UFC event, fighters played the video games with fans during the weighing-in ceremony to promote the newly released game, *UFC Throwdown*. A Zuffa publicist and Internet columnist remarked on the virtual action as Light Heavyweight Champion Tito Ortiz, playing 'himself' in the game, was defeated by another UFC stalwart's fiancé, playing the part of a third 'real' fighter in the two-dimensional Octagon. Layers of representation pile on as simulated violence is recycled into expectations of real violence.

## Conclusion

Sean Kingston (1999: 339), in his discussion of the 'essential attitude' taken up in relation to primitive art and ethnographic display, draws attention to the fact that anxieties about 'authenticity' arise only in particular circumstances; people do not uniformly problematize the 'reality' of everyday life (see also Trilling 1972). According to Kingston:

Problems of 'reality status', the attribution of what something is supposed to be, often cohere around performances and representations which are important because they present something otherwise regarded as ontologically inaccessible to the perceiver, hence the problematizing of their 'reality' or the truth of their 'being'. (Kingston 1999: 340)

Although he was discussing art, the observation characterizes one crucial source of doubt about the 'reality' of fighting as sport.

Although the obvious falseness of the WWE creates a vivid point of contrast, one reason for the ontological indeterminacy of the UFC (only 'as real as it gets', not 'real') is that many viewers assume that underlying all sports is sublimated war. Moments when fights actually do break out during hockey or baseball games only confirm this suspicion, which also saturates the metaphors used to describe sport of all types. Fighting, then, is commonly seen to be the denied essence of all sport; sport is battle carried out by less decisive means.

Moreover, conflict is often assumed to underlie much of social life in Western society, from politics and economics, to family and social interaction. Some of the earliest social theorists in the Western canon have assumed that, in the words of Plautus, 'man is a wolf to man', hemmed in from exercising baser instincts to fight with tooth and nail only by social convention, laws, and the threat of superior force. It should come as no surprise that fight-sports in general are held in close proximity to the sites of greatest adult hyperreality in the United States: not Disneyland, as Baudrillard suggests, but the casinos of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, where the global landscape of tourist sites – Venice, Cairo, the Taj Mahal, New York City, Paris, Coney Island – is condensed into a single hyperreal 'strip' of mammoth casino-hotels. Virtual combat and gambling, two of the great metaphors of late capitalism, juxtaposed under neon lights.

The UFC puts the wolves in a cage and allegedly lets them reveal their essential nature. Concerns about the 'reality' of no-holds-barred fighting, then, arise not merely from comparison to other sports, but also from a suspicion that some

truth about human nature should be revealed. As Handler and Saxton (1988: 243) suggest, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* is 'As Real As It Gets!' because 'individuals feel themselves to be in touch both with a 'real' world and with their 'real' selves'. Although the fights may not reveal the 'truth' of what would happen if two people fought with no holds barred – really – they tell us more than we might expect about what

many assume to be the nature of human life. When fights turn out to be boring, rather slow-moving, drawn-out technical battles, one source of discontent is that reality doesn't live up to our expectations. The only explanation is that reality has not been able to emerge through cultural niceties and learned inhibitions; these inhibitions are 'less real'. If only reality was as exciting as our fantasies about it.

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