

**A Fighting Fandom:
The Commercialization of a Young and Growing Sport**

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Abstract:

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a growing sports phenomenon which showcases multiple combat disciplines such as boxing, muay thai, judo, wrestling, jiu-jitsu and numerous others. The sport has seen steady growth since its inception in the early 90's but recently has seen tremendous growth as the premiere MMA promotion, The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), has seen rapid expansion and visibility through promotions, name recognition and mainstream coverage. As this growth continues - including current network deals for programming, cross promoted events and MMA stars transitioning into mainstream media - the fans have always remained right on the pulse and have been as instrumental as any athletic commission or promoter in helping the sport continue to prosper. By looking at the example of a renowned MMA blogger and video editor known as Boondock, the greater influence of youtube upon fandom, and fan-created news websites upon MMA, I intend to frame the current development of the sport and why the fans continued interaction with the fighters, promoters and greater community has allowed the sport to continue to grow and find a greater audience and acceptance.

Originally billed as a no-hold barred fighting spectacle, the world of mixed martial arts and its premiere organization - The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) - have rapidly become a part of the mainstream sports world and world media culture. A combat sport of the highest degree, MMA has emerged from the controversy it endured during its formative years in the 1990's as a sport rivaling boxing in popularity, athletic ability and audience. With this rapid expansion and mainstream acceptance, the fans have emerged as torchbearers, defenders, bloggers, supporters and in many cases the next generation of mixed martial artists as numerous fans have taken great active interest in the disciplines their favorite fighters practice.

Until recently the UFC and even more so the greater world of MMA was ignored and often vilified by mainstream media because of its controversial and violent nature which includes striking, submissions, wrestling, judo and any other form of martial art you can imagine. From 1999-2001 the UFC was forced into what fans refer to as "The Dark Ages" as they were unable to secure pay-per-view specials or home video releases and mounting political pressure and unsympathetic athletic commissions refused to sanction events in the majority of the United States. However, the fans remained loyal through messageboards, other online communities and the inception of Sherdog.com, the most popular MMA news and information site on the internet which recently became an official ESPN affiliate and was founded by an early MMA fan. Right now MMA is on the cusp. Two separate MMA promotions have already brokered deals with major network television stations -the California based Strikeforce organization with NBC and EliteXC with CBS - pay-per-view numbers are besting boxing events and athletes, gyms and trainers are becoming vastly more available and pervasive worldwide.

With these huge developments, the fandom has changed and adapted alongside it. MMA is less than twenty years old and because of this the fandom is decidedly younger, for the most part, than most established sport communities. In Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* he discusses the differences across a current adolescent fan versus himself when he was that age. The current MMA fan does not know a world without last night's PPV fights being posted on youtube by other fans or internet radio shows and podcasts with fighter interviews and questionnaires. The early years of mainstream ignorance of the sport and its athletes lead fans to find other ways of engaging the sport outside of ESPN or radio sports coverage such as WFAN. The MMA fan is a supporter and a consumer but they engage their products differently and given the sport's current market saturation fans are playing a huge role in the direction the sport is going.

Consider this [video](#)¹. This is a highlight video, a common theme in MMA fandom, which basically showcases famous fights, knockouts, submissions, victories and defeats. An MMA blogger and amateur video editor who goes by the pseudonym 'Boondock' created this particular video along with several others in his spare time. His videos are widely considered the best representations of great moments in the sport's brief history by active MMA fans. Interestingly, this is a surprisingly useful contrast to the 'Closer' video which poses the question "What if Spock had not made it to Vulcan in time?". Both videos were created by active fans of their respective texts, both use Nine Inch Nails songs to build tension and emotion and both have found great acclaim in their fan communities. While the 'Hurt' video does not indicate a set narrative or drastically reinterpret actual events, the idea behind the two is decidedly similar: to promote and

¹ All relevant links are listed at the end of the paper if this hyperlink does not work on your version of MSWord

engage a text that the creators cherish but not in a traditional or even necessarily *legal* manner. However, the reason this is important in the context of MMA stems from the fact that the sport is still growing, adapting, and finding its ideal audience and the fans that have been there from the start are the ones helping to dictate these changes. For instance, Boondock recently signed on as an exclusive fight scene editor for an upcoming film structured around mixed martial arts called *Owned* which features some of the most famous names in the sport. Although the growth of the sport has lead it out of the “dark ages” and into mainstream sports culture, fans remain the most vocal and active in the community. Furthermore, in cases such as Sherdog.com or further websites of that nature the fans have transitioned from being simply fans to being writers, promoters, reporters, critics and columnists.

The Boondock example seemingly represents an example of marketers and promoters of MMA opting to utilize a sort of “fan celebrity” in a commercial product instead of doing certain leg-work themselves. This is a fairly recent, although greatly beneficial, concept that is being seen throughout other fan communities. Boondock’s work is respected within the MMA community, is of significant quality in terms of editing and content, and finally the work is seemingly already done. Kristin Thompson’s book *The Frodo Franchise* hints at many similar concepts as this by acknowledging New Line Cinema’s use of already established fan sites to build buzz, keep fans updated and relay news information. In the MMA world this is not just a used practice, it is a rather common one. Before HDNet had an exclusive MMA news show or ESPN was reporting on the week’s biggest upsets and knockouts, websites were hosting podcasts, internet radio shows, fighter interviews and these websites were started by fans and enthusiasts of

the sport. Even more importantly, they have stood the test of time and at any given UFC or MMA related event you will commonly see press materials given to fan run but undeniably popular and informative websites such as PunchDrunkGamer.com, MMAWeekly.com, FiveOuncesofPain.com, and SutureMagazine.net. Many of these sites were started simply as hobbies and were created in order to cover a sport that no one else was covering. Now, given the sport's increased visibility and popularity, these fans have been put in a very interesting position. No one knows what the fan community wants to see better than dedicated and enthusiastic fans. While these webmasters initially had no intentions of making money from their hobbies, they now find themselves at the forefront of the internet community of MMA. When no one else would broadcast the fights or report on them, the fans did it themselves and given the increased cash flow into the sport, the fans have been put in a position to keep covering and reporting on the sport that they supported before it was commercially viable to do so. The saturation of the MMA market has lead to dozens of apparel and athletic equipment companies, franchising of major MMA gyms and training camps as well as DVD distribution companies all in needs of appropriate advertising where the fans will see their product. The fans who run these websites, zines, and blogs are finding their piece of the pie in the world of mixed martial arts.

Perhaps the most obvious example of commercial acceptance of viral media and fan habits is the International Fight League's (IFL) deal with Youtube. The deal, agreed upon in November, 2007, calls for the IFL to exclusively share short form content, including fighter interviews, exclusive press conference content, highlight footage of fights and exclusive advertisements for upcoming events on Youtube.com. The deal was

unprecedented as the UFC's parent company Zuffa LLC have long been vehement protectors of their copyrighted material upon Youtube. It is important to realize that being a fan of MMA has not been cheap as of late. UFC pay-per-views are 44.95 each and they tend to happen once a month or so on top of Spike TV's regular airings of archive footage and free events known as "Ultimate Fight Nights". The most important and meaningful fights are typically reserved for pay-per-views because headline fighters demand sizable paychecks and live gate sales simply do not cover the costs associated with putting on a live show. The vast majority of fans cannot afford to order every pay-per-view and in order to see the fights that make the world of MMA so interesting, we are forced into finding illegally posted fights on blogs, youtube, google video, dailymotion and anywhere else that can host a stream before Zuffa's lawyers can have them taken down. The IFL's embrace of this tendency is smart because it allows a young company to spread their name brand through an established avenue while still sharing advertising revenues through Google's AdSense and Youtube's new watermark advertisements. The IFL had a television deal with the little known MyNetworkTV but they were savvy enough to realize that their young brand, the IFL began in 2006, needed to be able to catch on with established fans of the sport and exploiting a free avenue and common fan destination such as youtube was a given if they wanted to make an impact upon fans. While the IFL has not been very successful in terms of profits it is important to realize that MMA has only recently become marketable and even the UFC suffered from years of massive debt and restructuring until its recent surge in popularity.

The importance of the fans is so undeniable that even the most established names in MMA regularly attend trade shows and conventions to express gratitude and offer

small consolations for the fans dedication to the fighters and the sport. Boondock's highlight videos and the IFL's exclusive Youtube page are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how MMA fans engage and follow the sport but the importance of viral media to the greater world of MMA is constantly being realized by promoters and related businesses alike. Any reputable MMA news site regularly offers video or audio interviews, programming or other content in order to give the fans greater insight into the sport and upcoming bouts. It is no secret that Youtube is a common hub for MMA fans and the fact that the IFL chose to use Youtube to their advantage is not necessarily surprising, it's refreshing and hopefully the beginning of a trend.

Links:

<http://boondockvideo.wordpress.com/>

- *Blog and website for Boondock highlight videos, mma news, info, etc.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQeq9SLyFOI>

- *"Hurt" by Boondock. MMA highlight video, entirely UFC footage.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWSMUfuPlpA&feature=related>

- *"Furious Angels" by Boondock. MMA highlight video, entirely PrideFC footage.*

<http://www.youtube.com/user/ifl>

- *International Fight League youtube user page.*