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Netprov: Elements of an Emerging Form

By Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig

Introduction

While improvisational theater has a well-documented history, the role of improvisation on the Internet has been only the topic of passing speculation (Laurel; Murray), either applied metaphorically to the user interface or in speculation on the nature of computer-mediated textual exchange particularly in the context of identity formation (Turkle). While Improvisation is deeply connected to the authorial practices of players of MMORPGs and their MOO precursors (LaFarge) and to players of story-generation games such as Jason Rohrer's "Sleep is Death" and to participants in ARGs, we are specifically interested in text-centered improvisation that has as its goal the creation of a narrative or narrative world, rather than primarily the development of a game experience.

In this paper, we propose to define a new category of collaborative authorship on the Web: Networked Improv Narrative (netprov), as a genre of electronic literature predicated on establishing contexts for online synchronous and asynchronous writing. After briefly reviewing categories of theatrical improvisation especially the influence of Del Close, we will move into the immediate precursors of Internet improvisation. The remainder of the paper will explore several creative works that epitomize networked improv, particularly works that we, the authors, have had direct involvement, including, *The LA Flood Project*, *Blue Company*, *The Los Wikiless Timespedia*, the *Chicago Soul Exchange*, *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth*, and *Grace, Wit, and Charm*. The structure of the paper takes on the spirit of collaboration of improv, as we banter back and forth in a dialogue about this emerging form.

MarkCMarino:

@GWandC Finally, my Big News! Sonny, Laura, Deb, Neil: YOU have been selected as the Open House Team! Details: http://cot.ag/mh4Xs8 #GWandC

@Sonny1SoBlue @GWandC Wait, Bob. Strangers are reading this right now? As we work? Every minute for two weeks? Aren't there laws against that? #GWandC

@GWand @Sonny1SoBlue Not "Strangers" reading yr Tweets. "Potential Cugstomers!" [sic] Legal in most states. It will be fun! Corporate says so! #GWandC

@Neil_GWa @GwandC okay if I drop a mention of my instructional vidz? As long as people are going to be there. #GWandC

The dialogue above is a Twitter exchange (aka Twitterlogue) between a corporate account and two employees. The company, Grace, Wit, and Charm, offers a very timely set of services for the Web 2.0 crowd: smoother movements for your avatar (Grace), zingers for your status updates (Wit), and overall attractiveness to your online dating (Charm). The employees, Sonny and Neil, have just found out their private backchannel Tweets will now become public as part of the two-week corporate Open House. Such stunts are almost mundane in the age of guerilla social marketing where every person is a potential carrier for a brand or meme and where the division between personal space and private space is itself a polite fiction. Actually, these two employees are not real either: They are characters in a work of improvised online literature or netprov, a work that any Twitter member could join. While the @ symbols allow them to address each other, it is the hashtag #GWandC that enables the work to create an open stage for networked collaborative performance.

Netprov is a genre born of this media moment out of the classical Western tradition of improvisational theater and the tradition in digital culture of engaging in computer-mediated communication within theatrical and conversational metaphors.

Rob Wittig proposed this notion of networked literary improv to me during conversation while we were both researching at the University of Bergen in Norway. The term quickly proved itself to be a powerful way of describing the work that both he and I were doing. It not only spoke to our previous projects (Rob: IN.S.OMNIA, *Friday's Big Meeting, Blue Company, Chicago Soul Exchange*; Mark: *The Los Wikiless Timespedia*, *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth*) but also came to shape our current works, including our recent collaborations on the *LA Flood Project* and *Grace, Wit & Charm*. More importantly, it seemed enlivened with that spark that incited the wit of the Wittig in my favorite pieces from his oeuvre. At its heart, netprov is playful, democratic, anarchic, and imaginative, traits that direct Wittig's work and populate his poetics. Throughout this article we will take turns at the mic, echoing

the dialogic nature of our work on this new form. After defining the characteristics of netprov, we will offer examples, including precursors, alternating descriptions of the works with commentary from one or both of us. But perhaps a more conversational structure will better suit such a tag-teamed essay....

RobWittig:

Testing! Testing! Test! Is this microphone working? Test? Can you hear me, Mark? (clears throat)

Yes, Mark, both you and I are experimenting our way to this new art form, netprov. Alongside creating netprovs, my research in the last few years has been to seek out intriguing examples and precursors in the fields of literature, theater, mass media entertainment and games. I've connected the dots between these far-flung projects and tried to combine the best ideas from each into a resilient new formula, projects such as:

Example One

A cobra escapes from the Bronx Zoo in March 2011. Hours after the news story hits the media, the cobra begins to post messages to Twitter.

@BronxZoosCobra
Want to clear up a misconception. I'm not poisonous as has been reported. I'm venomous. Super venomous, but not poisonous so don't worry.
28 Mar

@BronxZoosCobra
A lot of people are asking how I can Tweet with no access to a computer or fingers. Ever heard of an iPhone? Duh.
28 Mar

@BronxZoosCobra
What does it take to get a cab in this city?! It's cause I'm not white isn't it.
28 Mar

With its gorgeously simple, real-time fantasy premise and its well-observed everyday voice this project is, to me, the epitome of a single-voice netprov. It is spare and flexible. The narrative can move anywhere from anywhere. Within a few posts the initial joke becomes satire: "What does it take to get a cab . . .". The initial joke

itself is not to be underestimated; the snake that speaks mirrors the fundamental, spooky joke of all writing: the lifeless object that speaks. As the cobra's

followers multiply, it becomes aware of its own fame. Within a couple of weeks the energy of the project fades away, and so do the Tweets. The project follows the natural life cycle of the medium.

Example Two

During the hard-fought 2011 election to replace long-time Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, son of even longer-time Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, someone begins Tweeting as candidate Rahm Emanuel, the notoriously foul-mouthed and hard-bitten former Obama White House aide.

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
And Daley's gesturing for me to follow him, and suddenly we're out a window and heading up a motherfucking fire escape.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
We're on the roof of City Hall. The wind is fucking strong and the snow stings when it hits my face. Daley heads into a glass dome.
21 Feb

…@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
It's so warm and beautiful in the dome–green everywhere–and the air is pungent with the smell of… is that fucking celery?
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
He hands me a small pinch of powder and the sharp taste of celery salt crosses my lips. "Our legacy," he says, and points to the stalks.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
And it's then that I notice for the first fucking time that, nestled amid the stalks of celery are three modest headstones.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
Daley points to the headstones. "They're here with us, always. Harrison, Washington, Dad." He chokes up on that last one.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
I search the ground for three small pebbles. Daley's fucking silent while I place one on each of the gravestones.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
"It blooms year-round, thanks to them," he says quietly. And we're just looking, standing, breathing the thick moist air. Together.
21 Feb

The real-life Emanuel at first objects to the parody, but then realizes it's better for his campaign to go along with the joke. Of course, he'd better get used to improvisational parody if he's going to be mayor of the former "Second City." The project turns out to have been created by Chicago writer Dan Sinker. As Anne Trubek reports in The Economist, the twitter feed becomes so notorious that Sinker garners a book contract for his fake Rahm Emanuel (Trubeck).

I love these single-voice netprovs, Mark, but you and I are both dreaming of something more:

netprovs with multiple characters, netprovs that invoke more complex fictional worlds, netprovs that grab you the way novels and plays used to, netprovs with depth and resonance.

Which is why this next project, on the other hand, has almost all the characteristics of the potential new art form.

Example Three

Game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal acts as "Participation Architect" for *World Without Oil*, an alternate reality game (ARG) financed in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, that is first played (or you might say, performed) in 2007. In the game, players write plausible "forecasts" from their varied professional, geographic and cultural perspectives of the results of a sudden cessation of the world's oil supply. According to her account the first period of the game was taken up with doomsday scenarios, but the last part of the game saw the rise of collaborative problem solving. The game leaked out into real life:

mpathytest writing in World Without Oil

Last week, Emil and I came up with our first crazy experiment for changing our everyday lives in a world without oil. The first thing we decided to change? How we have fun on Friday nights!

We both organized Ped Parties on our respective coasts. There's only one rule for a Ped Party, and it's very simple: you have to walk (be a pedestrian) or bike (pedal pedal pedal!) to the party, both ways. Only human fuel allowed!

…Anyway, after I drew up the map with people's prospective walking and biking distances, I wound up having to choose a rather unlikely location – a German restaurant I'd never been to before.

…turns out this restaurant was also hosting some kind of a Pirate Party. I kid you not. We didn't know that 'til we go there. So my friends and I hung out, somewhat sweat from how we got there, with folks in full pirate gear. I tried to discreetly take some photos, but they didn't turn out so great because I thought it might be rude to be taking tons of flash photos of the pirates like they were freaks, when really, they were actually pretty cool!

Dear reader, as Mark mentioned, both he and I have been doing netprov-like and netprov projects for a long time and they really challenge, interest and amuse us. We see the promise, in netprov, of an exciting new art form.

In This Article

In this article we:

1. pose a working definition and key characteristics of netprov

2. talk about sources of netprov in the fields of literature, theater, mass media, the internet, social media, personal media (telephone, text message, e-mail), and networked games,

3. describe earlier netprov projects we each have done,

4. comment on a couple of each other's key projects,

5. talk about Grace, Wit & Charm, a project we both worked on, and that I explicitly intended to include as many modes of netprov as I could imagine, and

6. look ahead a bit at the potential future of netprov.

I have known and admired Mark's work for years and know that we share similar tastes and impulses in writing—in particular, an insatiable urge, when faced with a new venue for writing, to jump into that venue and pretend to be someone we're not. The year before at the ELO Archive and Innovate conference in Providence, in conversation my 2010 web fiction *Chicago Soul Exchange*, Mark kindly expressed interest in collaborating on the next project, *Grace, Wit & Charm*. I was delighted.

Mark went on to write dialogue in the form of Twitter updates for all four of the characters but took primary authorship of the character Neil. This entailed developing his plotline, formulating his personal mode of Twitterspeak, and acting as lead writer on "scenes," or rather sequences of Tweets, that dealt with Neil's plot points.

Mark's and my correspondence and conversations during *Grace, Wit & Charm* were examples of my favorite kind of literary discourse: critical thinking in order to make decisions about an actual, living work of fiction. My portion of the ideas here are developed further in my University of Bergen Digital Culture Master's thesis, *Networked Improv Narrative (Netprov) and the Story of Grace, Wit & Charm*.

Definition and Characteristics of Netprov

Netprov = networked improv narrative.

Netprov authors create stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

Netprov uses multiple vernacular media simultaneously in a transmedia storytelling approach. (Vernacular media are accessible everyday communications technologies used without special training.) Netprov's production can be collaborative and incorporate participatory contributions from readers. It can be read as a live performance as it is published; it can also be read later as a fixed archive. During the performance, projects can include breaking news. Netprov projects can use models or actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create. Netprov projects can require readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities. During the performance, netprov is designed to be read in small chunks throughout the day. It is not always assumed readers will read every chunk of text.

Threshold definition: To be netprov, a work must appear parodically in vernacular media, initially unfold in real time and be at least partly improvised.

The organizational structure of netprov is of an "inner circle" of writer/actors who are "in on the joke from the beginning" and an invited "outer circle" of reader/participant/players unknown to the inner circle. The inner circle operates like a show (cabaret, improv theater, play, or episodic television); the outer circle operates like a game which invites participation from anyone.

Characteristics of Netprov

Characteristic 1: Prose fiction

Netprov consists of narratives purportedly by and about people who don't exist (or fictional versions of people who do). Netprov tends to be dialogic and not to use omniscient narration, although nothing precludes netprov characters from succumbing to fits of stylistic self-awareness and beginning their own omniscient narration.

MarkCMarino:

Sorry, got to give you some friction over the "fiction." Isn't the "prov" all about improv from a stage tradition? Of course, we read stageplays as literature, too. In fact, my studies in literary seminars served up syllabi dripping with plays from Shakespeare to Molière, Aristophanes to a script from *Barney Miller*, if I remember correctly. If your criterion is that this form employs dialogue and not narration, drama seems the way to go. Or is it more that the text is meant to be read and not performed? Even there, I'd find the restriction too... er, restricting because to me Twitter Tweets are much more like spoken utterances than written messages due to their brevity and the dialogic nature of Twitter. Or perhaps we could settle on "literature."

RobWittig:

Point taken, Mark. The excitement, and curse, of netprov for me at this point is that I am as comfortable saying netprov is a form of drama as I am saying it is a form of literature. But to further complicate the issue, I'm also equally comfortable saying netprov is a game, a creative game.

The answer to your question would seem to be a matter of prioritizing. Is the illustrated text one gets at the end of a project the "main thing?" If so, then netprov is literature. Is the performance the main thing? Then netprov is drama. Is the collaborative interplay the main thing? Then it is a game. But I refuse to prioritize so early in the life of the form. For the moment I recognize netprov's triple citizenship as literature, drama and game. My answer, Mark, is "yes."

Characteristic 2: Improvised

The exact details and phrasing of netprov texts are left to the spontaneous impulse of the writer/actors. The writer/actors often work from a predetermined plot

scenario. Texts can be written immediately before publication or written ahead of time and published later using electronic, timed-release technologies.

MarkCMarino:

It's probably a good time to admit that theatrical improv isn't really improvised, or rather, that a lot of what is typically considered improvised or improv-based comedy, from Comedia Dell' Arte to Second City to *Waiting for Guffman*, is developed improvisationally based on a pre-arranged structure combined with well-rehearsed and essentially scripted elements.[1]

RobWittig:

Characteristic 3: In vernacular media

Netprov projects are written in the popular everyday, computational, writing/reading media of the time, regardless of whether or not the medium is considered a "literary" medium.

Characteristic 4: In Real Time

During the performance the fictional world and the reader's world are contemporaneous. Texts appear to be written moments before they are published. In fact, texts can be pre-written and scheduled for later publication using software services such as Hootsuite or Tweetdeck.

Characteristic 5: Transmedia

Netprov projects can be built in a "transmedia" way in multiple, parallel, non-duplicating media, for example where the same character has a Facebook page, a twitter account and a web page, with different, but coherent, texts evolving in each.

Characteristic 6: Collaborative

Netprov projects can be collaborative, sometimes with certain writers adopting and writing particular characters in whole or in part.

Characteristic 7: Participatory

Reader comments and contributions can be included and can shape the project.

Characteristic 8: Performed and Archived

During performance periods netprov projects unfold in real time. The aesthetic goal of the performance is similar to that of any one-time or episodic show: writers want to get their readers hooked on the characters and situation and to be eagerly awaiting the next communication. Reading patterns vary widely from reader to reader: some read updates as soon as they are received, some read once or twice a day, others catch up on reading every few days, many do all of the above at different times. The pacing and timing of e-mails can be used for aesthetic effect (pacing: awkwardly slow messaging; timing: workday escapes, midnight confessions). Timing tactics work best when the writers and readers are in proximate time zones. Netprov projects could be of any length; most of the ones Mark and I have done have lasted between one week and six weeks.

Netprov projects can also subsequently be read as fixed texts, or archives. This reading more closely resembles traditional book-culture reading. Blogs and social media archives such as Twapperkeeper are often presented in reverse chronological order that requires readers to use a proactive, back-and-forth reading style in order to reconstruct the chronological narrative. The archives can be edited and rewritten based on Twapperkeeper-style records to become substantially different from the performance.

Characteristic 9: Incorporating Current Events

During the performance phase, netprov projects can incorporate current events. Some satirical netprov projects, such as the fake Rahm Emanuel, are primarily written in response to breaking news. Even in projects that are largely pre-written, current events can be woven into the story themes and used to expand and enrich them at the time of publication.

Characteristic 10: Including Physical Enactment in Real Life

In some netprov projects, fictional characters are portrayed by models or actors in photographs, videos, live performances, and live action role play (LARP). In locative media projects, GPS-enabled devices track the movements of characters, or require readers to travel to certain places in order to read certain texts. Other projects on the model of alternate reality games (ARGs) may operate like treasure hunts, requiring characters and/or readers to go to certain locations to get clues, perform

actions, read or write physical text, or take photographs to be posted to internet maps.

Characteristic 11: Designed for Episodic and Incomplete Reading

It is not always assumed readers will read every word or every episode. Netprov projects can be designed to give a satisfactory aesthetic experience even if readers see only fragments. One never knows where one's readers read, but an ideal of netprov is to seed the real world with imagination, to sneak fiction into a reader's mindstream during the time devoted to "reality" rather than the compartmentalized time set aside for "entertainment." The strategy is to give readers a rewarding experience both if they read only a few messages and if they become devoted fans. The goal is to be skillful enough to entice readers into the depths. There need be no requirement or expectation of completeness.

MarkCMarino:

Very clear and thorough definition, Rob, and let's not forget the potentials for automated agents to play a role in netprov as well. Based on my research on conversation agents, or chatbots, I would add that agents as simple as Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA (1966)[2] offer opportunities for an improvised performance of a netprov type. But I'll get to that a bit later. First, to the theater and a little history.

Literary, Theater and Game Sources of Netprov

Improv in Theater

Netprov emerges out of the intertwined traditions of improvised theater and theatrical metaphors used to organize computer-mediated experiences. The theatrical strands stem from the lineage of improvisational games both long and short form, that have developed in theater circles and most notably on the stage starting in the United States in the 1950s with the Compass Players and Chicago's Second City and continuing on with Improv Olympics, the Groundlings, and many similar groups across the United States and around the world. Tim Uren in Finding the Game in Improvised Theater offers a brief overview of the recent history of improv in the United States in describing improv games and classifying improv itself as a game.[3] In his words, in simplest terms, improv is "a series of reactions guided

by a set of rules." The reactions, in this context, are the responses of the actors to each other in the moment as they strive to follow the rules and respond authentically within the constraints of their assigned role. The rules, or constraints that govern action, are either pre-established in the structure of the improvised piece or are created vis-a-vis the reactions. Uren offers the example of a person who introduces himself with a slight stammer as "Uh…Steve" who then becomes known as "Uh…Steve" for the rest of the performance. As the other performers take this name literally, they transfer a momentary pause or verbal tic into a fact of the story, a rule for the game: the spontaneous or accidental slip has become part of the rules of the game itself. Improv involves co-creation of the stage world, dependent on collaborative authorship of previous conditions (retroactively) as well as present developments.

Again, we note that improvisation does not require invention on the spot without rehearsal. While audience suggestions may offer some of the constraints of an improv game, for example. Nevertheless, actors typically rehearse these games to develop patterns of reaction. More importantly, much of improv in theater is used in a development process rather than the final project. Examples of this include improvised films, such as those by the team of actors, some Second City alums, that produced This is Spinal Tap, Waiting for Guffman, Best in Show, and A Mighty Wind. Improv marks a process of collaborative development of material, but not all improvised material is unplanned or even completely unscripted.

In this sense, improvisation is a form of collaborative performance whose stage and scenery are constructed by the combination of the particular manner and content of the utterances of the performers. These performative "utterances" in the Austinian sense include all actions, gestures, words, and even inaction and silence, with the reinforcement of the recognition of those utterances. While J.L. Austin established performative utterances as a special class of words reserved for certain socially scripted occasions (such as "I do" in a wedding ceremony), every utterance in an improvisation builds that world through the mutual consent of the participants. Improvisation, therefore, is a collaborative construction whose rules of play emerge not solely from the work of any one performer or contributor but by the recognition and reinforcement (i.e., the "yes, and") of the other players.

Improvisational theater, by these terms, operates on continuum with role-playing games, particularly live-action role-playing games (or LARPs). Dungeons and Dragons helped initiate the genre in the mid-1970s with a game that allowed participants to perform the role of fanciful characters while taking on adventures directed by a director-cum-dramaturg, the Dungeon Master. Live-action role-playing emerged at roughly the same time, taking up the classical tropes of fantasy and science fiction for the frameworks for collaborative improvised play. Similar to the table top games, the Game Master of the LARP "is responsible for inventing an enticing world with many things to do in it, a world populated by clearly drawn

characters and offering a good dramatic mix of challenges and surprises" (Murray 150). Meanwhile, "the players have a great deal of constructive freedom in improvising the story" (151). Netprov shares with LARPing the liveness, though emphasizes more the collaborative performances over the pleasure of play. It is, however, interesting to note that live-action uses the same term popular entertainment uses to distinguish between animated and embodied cinematic narratives.

As forerunners of netprov, MUDs, and their descendent MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), offered a space where players crafted their world not just through text but also through code as they played their role while programming new objects to live in the space. In a 1995 essay, Antoinette LaFarge describes MOOs as a theatrical space of online improvisation. As she describes, "users experience MOOs as a form of shared fiction that they create and inhabit simultaneously. The drama unfolds as text into a unique form of verbal theater with its own rules of structure and unexpected beauty of thought" (415).

To demonstrate the theatricality of MOOs it's useful to contrast it with another work of emergent, collaborative, networked writing, Robert Coover's "Hypertext Hotel." As in the many rooms of the MOO, Coover's project used the spatial metaphor of the hotel as framework as an ever-expanding setting for a fictional hypertext with many author-guests, who could check in and fill the rooms with drama. As such, both exemplify netprov; howevever, Coover's was clearly set in the literary realm of fiction rather than theater or drama. Coover's Hypertext Inn invited flights of postmodern prose, while MOOs, by requiring authors to participate primarily through avatar characters, offered affordaces for more theatrical interactions. LaFarge notes that she could have called it "online improvisation," "live theater, jazz fiction, or consensual narrative" (418). However, she retorts, "If I think of it as a form of theater, it is because the real power of this world lies in the ways people inhabit personalities (roles) through words. As with other forms of theater, the point is in the enactment of the text, not the text itself" (418). In her formulation, MOOs and MUDs are improvised, vernacular forms, fostering real-time (and asynchronous) collaborative and participatory interaction in a dramatic context, all of which are the criteria of netprov.

While MUDs have an obvious place in the lineage from role-playing games to MMORPGs, it is the even less defined, less framed space of the MOO, where the "dungeon" tended to recede more readily into the nomenclature, that made them broad platforms for netprov. Again, LaFarge situates MOOs as theater:

Within this extensible fiction, one interacts with other people under an assumed name, carrying out activities of all kinds – conversing both privately and publicly, exploring strange places, voting, having what is endearingly called "tiny sex,"

acquiring property. From this it is a small step to creating roles around a specific dramatic scenario. (416)

Theatrical play in MOOs was subject to oversight of a director who was also a player. More importantly, in the verb-centered syntax of the MOO, actors engaged through actions. The words do not serve as script or transcript but instead words make things happen. Participants were not restrained to playing their roles, they could write actions and dialogue for other characters, affect the setting or stage, and even create objects with particular behaviors. Though MOOs have largely disappeared, their shadow can still be seen in visually rendered virtual words, such as Second

RobWittig:

Mark: yes! In fact: yes, and! (The arch rule of Chicago's Second City improv theater is: "Always agree: "Yes, and""(Libera)) Where the literary sources of netprov meet the theater sources is in the figure of the writer/actor which begins in antiquity with the ancient roots of Commedia Dell'Arte and continues through the writer/actors of the improv-rooted skit comedy TV show Saturday Night Live such as Mike Meyers, whose improv-and-skit-based character Wayne evolved into two full-length Wayne's World movies. Most of the contemporary writer actors come from the theater side, but when we recall the accounts of Charles Dickens loudly acting out his characters as he composed, we realize that the literature side has its own writer/actor tradition to contribute to netprov.

MarkCMarino:

Please, sir, I want some more…discussion of the medium. For this form is emerging not in bound-up serialized novels but on networked computers, which have their own theatrical heritage.

Several of the key facets of netprov, then, emerge directly from improv and role-playing games. First, both improv and netprov require that works emerge in "real time." The scarequotes here indicate the potential for asynchronous participation through software to time postings or pre-set contributions. The requirement for spontaneity also has deep ties to the imperative of improv to respond to the moment and not to pre-script the experience. In fact, in the Second City school of improvisation, "playwriting" is a negative term for one who is attempting to manipulate the scene and control or direct the participation of others.[4] For example, in an improvised scene about two lovers one might say, "You always bring up your ex-wife just to spite me," when the other actor has not even mentioned the existence

of that character. Such attempts to control the scenario work against the spirit of improv, which is at its core so heavily collaborative.

Because netprov holds text as the central story-telling medium, however, the form tends to produce results more common in literary games. Both Rob and I draw upon both the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo) and the Surrealists (particularly the technique of the exquisite corpse), and we tend to privilege emergent process-driven writing. However, the process never fully determines which works are preserved and circulated. For example, the novels If On a Winter's Night a Traveler (Italo Calvino) and A Void (George Perec) present not accidental or incidental results of the process, but deeply resonant literary products. A Void ('La Disparition'), for example, Georges Perec's masterful novel written without the letter e, is not merely a tale that has had a vowel removed, it is a profound meditation on loss and absence particularly in light of the Holocaust (Motte). Although Calvino claimed If on a Winter's Night a Traveler was written following permutations of a Gramscian square, his novel is far more than a mechanical execution of a procedure. Instead, the novel, if it can be called one, gestures toward the impossibility of containing all the configurations of reader, other readers, and the reading experience.[5] Similarly netprov offers the opportunity for quite a bit of polish since the ultimate aim is not to serve the spontaneous process but to deliver literature worth reading twice, to borrow a phrase from Nate Hawthorne.

Theater, Games, and Computers

Netprov grows out of a long tradition that frames human-computer-interaction (HCI) within a theatrical metaphor, developed in works from Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* or even earlier Brenda Laurel's 1993 *Computers as Theater*.[6] Laurel, who raises the curtain on this approach, describes user interaction with computers as essentially a theatrical encounter. Specifically, she likens the experience of a computer to *Commedia Dell'Arte*, portraying HCI as spontaneous improvised interaction with established and encoded signifiers and processes, including the conventional costumes for each character, the ready set pieces, and the collection of *lazzi* or "standard bits of business" (106). Laurel links these constraints to the "formal and material constraints" placed upon "people who are engaged in computer-based mimetic activities" (106). However, most of Laurel's work is not describing software that offers an opportunity to create theater but HCI in general. It is Murray's *Holodeck* that explicitly seeks a virtual stage as she explores story generation software, autonomous agents, and video games with respect to their potential for interactive storytelling and drama. This image of the Holodeck, derived from TV's *Star Trek: The Next Generation* evokes the fantasy of interacting with fully rendered virtual actors. However, theatrical improvisational play on computers did not begin with the graphical browser, but had already

emerged on bulletin boards (like the IN.S.OMNIA) and Multi-User Dungeons (or MUDs).

To demonstrate the theatricality of MOOs it's useful to contrast it with another work of emergent, collaborative, networked writing, Robert Coover's "Hypertext Hotel." As in the many rooms of the MOO, Coover's project used the spatial metaphor of the hotel as framework as an ever-expanding setting for a fictional hypertext with many author-guests, who could check in and fill the rooms with drama. As such, both exemplify netprov; howevever, Coover's was clearly set in the literary realm of fiction rather than theater or drama. Coover's Hypertext Inn invited flights of postmodern prose, while MOOs, by requiring authors to participate primarily through avatar characters, offered affordaces for more theatrical interactions. LaFarge notes that she could have called it "online improvisation," "live theater, jazz fiction, or consensual narrative" (418). However, she retorts, "If I think of it as a form of theater, it is because the real power of this world lies in the ways people inhabit personalities (roles) through words. As with other forms of theater, the point is in the enactment of the text, not the text itself" (418). In her formulation, MOOs and MUDs are improvised, vernacular forms, fostering real-time (and asynchronous) collaborative and participatory interaction in a dramatic context, all of which are the criteria of netprov.

While MUDs have an obvious place in the lineage from role-playing games to MMORPGs, it is the even less defined, less framed space of the MOO, where the "dungeon" tended to recede more readily into the nomenclature, that made them broad platforms for netprov. Again, LaFarge situates MOOs as theater:

Within this extensible fiction, one interacts with other people under an assumed name, carrying out activities of all kinds—conversing both privately and publicly, exploring strange places, voting, having what is endearingly called "tiny sex," acquiring property. From this it is a small step to creating roles around a specific dramatic scenario. (416)

Theatrical play in MOOs was subject to oversight of a director who was also a player. More importantly, in the verb-centered syntax of the MOO, actors engaged through actions. The words do not serve as script or transcript but instead words make things happen. Participants were not restrained to playing their roles, they could write actions and dialogue for other characters, affect the setting or stage, and even create objects with particular behaviors. Though MOOs have largely disappeared, their shadow can still be seen in visually rendered virtual words, such as Second Life.

Despite the many surface similarities with theater, it is worth noting that LaFarge stil feels it necessary to stage an argument that MOOs should be seen as a space for interactive drama, suggesting they were not commonly perceived as such. When the performative nature of a medium is not foregrounded in conventional usage, the

artist intervenes to demonstrate the dramatic potential by staging a fiction and marking it as such. A netprov stages just such an intervention.

Out of this historic lineage arises Murray's dream: the chance of interacting, improvising, with an automated character, a dream glimpsed in ELIZA and its descendants but which found even greater realization in Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern's interactive drama, *Façade*. In this freely downloadable interactive storygame, played as a standalone game on PC or Mac, the interactor takes the role of a friend visiting college classmates ten years after graduation on the evening of *the* fight of their marriage. The game permits natural language input on the part of the interactor, who can chat with Trip and Grace as they head for disaster. Although this is a game and not an online performance, the software does output scripts at the end of a session. Players may produce a script in which they save the couple from divorce or they might create their own narrative, as in the case of this published script by a player pretending he is dying of cancer (http://bunkmagazine.com/dandg/wrt/cancer.txt).

I raise this last example as a way to introduce another major strain in the lineage of netprov, interactive stories, and interactive dramas, a category which can include digital narratives from interactive fiction to story-based video games to conversation agents or chatbots. Although it lies outside the scope of this particular article, chatbots have much to contribute to this discussion of netprov since they offer a pre-scripted set of responses organized around a character in the context of a framing encounter awaiting an interactor to engage with the system in order to produce a conversation.[7] Arguably chatbots and interactive dramas are the nearest neighbors to netprov or perhaps present an automated branch of netprov.[8]

Without fully reviewing the place of conversation in video games, we can at least gesture toward this realm of collaborative authorship as players interact with non-player characters (NPCs). The world of games also presents a context for improvisational performance in the genre of role-playing games (RPGs), and the text-based exchanges of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games offer another digitally mediated realm where collaborative play becomes collaborative story-telling. Again, they grow out of a real-world tradition of games, but find exponential growth in online environments. However, netprov is specifically directed toward audiences, whereas in MMORPGs and RPGs in general the focus is primarily on playing the game rather than performance. In other words, the primary goal of the game is presumably the pleasure associated with engaging with a contest constrained by rules, while the primary goal of improv is to entertain the audience (or to produce the work that will entertain the audience).

RobWittig:

During the development and performance of Grace, Wit & Charm I came up with a personal goal for netprov in my private sketchbook and posted it above my computer as guidance. I might as well share it here as an elaboration of the goal of "entertaining the audience." For me, the goals of netprov are laughter, insight, and empathy.

MarkCMarino:

Yes, and that explains to me why you align netprov with the literary rather than the purely ludic. Obviously, games are entertaining (i.e. professional sports), but the player of World of Warcraft, for example, is more likely to be focused on their enjoyment of the game than to their fellow player's enjoyment of her performance. Nonetheless, this is no doubt a distinction without a disruption in the spectrum of improvised play. Murray predicts:

Over the next century…we may come to think of cyberdrama in all its variations as an essentially collaborative art form. Perhaps a group of role-players will be like a commedia dell'arte troupe…. The on-line role-playing contributions of amateur improvisers will lead to new formulas of interactions that will feed into the general expressiveness of the medium. (248)

Netprov lives at that intersection of online role-playing, literary creation, and the self-conscious performance of identity online.

RobWittig:

Yes, and the type of game that seems to me to be closest to netprov is the alternate reality game (ARG) as articulated and practiced by Jane McGonigal, particularly in her important new book, *Reality is Broken* (McGonigal).

Alternate reality games are often organized using digital technologies, but they all require a certain amount of real world activity on the part of the reader/player. I described *World Without Oil* above, wherein the main participatory activity is writing. But in the example I cited we see how the player organized a real-life pedestrian party and then commented on it in the text. In ARGs players are often encouraged to role-play in such a way that, when documented as game-play, the results are

indistinguishable from what one, in netprov terms, we would call a creative performance and a fixed, written archive.

A simple example of an ARG McGonigal cites is *Chore Wars*. With graphics straight out of a Tolkein-like fantasy world, ***Chore Wars*** sums up its conceit in a simple phrase: "Finally, you can claim experience points for housework." A life-management ARG, families can register on the website and the site will track who has earned the most points for cleaning vacuuming or vanquishing the dread toilet bowl.

McGonigal talks about two air-travel related ARGs, first Ian Bogost's ***Jetset***, which is an iPhone game designed to ease the stress of airline travel with laughter. Coordinated by GPS, players go on missions in 100 real-world airports around the world, earn souvenirs and unlock Facebook gifts they can send to friends. ***Day in the Cloud*** is a game developed by Google Apps and Virgin airlines. It uses airborne wifi to turn the passengers of one flight into a team answering puzzles and completing creative challenges. The system then pits one plane/team against another flying at the same time. In McGonigal's account of this game she expands it with her own ideas, including GPS inclusion of teammates on the ground when a plane is passing over their state.

McGonigal, to me, is at her most inspiring when at her most speculative, like with her game *Superbetter*. *Superbetter* is a concept ARG developed in 2009 by McGonigal to aid her slow recovery from a bad concussion. She organized physical therapy as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-style series of missions that enlisted the help of a nearby and far-flung support network of friends and tracked her recovery publically. She offers the rules of her game at https://www.superbetter.us/

McGonigal's background in performance studies at Berkeley helps explain why her games so easily link to netprov's literary and theater sources. I connect her ARGs to a wonderful proto-ARG described by Kim Johnson in *The Funniest One in the Room: The Lives and Legends of Del Close* her biography of improv theater guru Close, According to Johnson, for years a large group of improv and skit comedy actor friends played a "Bang, you're dead" game that went on across two continents. The only rule was that when the finger was pointed at you and the magic phrase was uttered, you absolutely had to fake an extravagant melodramatic death, wherever you happened to be, at home, at work or at the altar. No points were tallied, the goal was aesthetic and surrealist: a point of honor in service of weirdness.

MarkCMarino:

Rob, and let me just say, you are the Mayor of that locale, with netprov badges galore to prove it. 😊

What games, MOOs, and interactive dramas reveal is that netprov flourishes in media built at the intersection of public and private communication. It is the private nature of the status message that establishes the genre as a place for personal revelation and self-narration, performance, yet it is their public nature that provides an audience – welcome, implicitly invited, yet not always intended. Their position as friendly eavesdroppers creates the potential for creative exploitation. Netprov is an opportunistic guerilla theater that capitalizes on the strange public-private conflation in which individual messaging becomes communal performance.

Twitter, therefore, is an obvious site for netprov since by applying the writing constraint of 140 characters, it always involves a kind of performance, where the ReTweet (or repeated Tweet) is the "rave review".[9] At the same time, since it does not require "authenticity" or even verification the way Facebook claims to, members are free to assume roles. The many Twitter versions of the Incredible Hulk provide one type of example, including Database Hulk and Adjunct Hulk. Another, Feminist Hulk, has Tweeted:

FEMINISTHULK: "TRICK TO SMASHING GENDER BINARY: MAKE SURE IT NOT SIMPLY BREAK INTO TWO NORMATIVE PIECES. HULK CREATE GENDERQUEER DEBRIS!"[10]

Other Tweeters take on the persona of religious figures to comic effect, such as Jesus M Christ. Or in the world of fan-fiction or fan-produced homages, one can witness collaborative play among Tweeters taking on roles from popular television shows such as *The Office* or *Battlestar Gallactica*[11] or evenJay Bushman's SXStarWars (http://sxstarwars.tumblr.com/) based at the annual SXSWi conference in 2011. Bushman has a number of fascinating and fun projects under the banner Sci-Fi Twitter Theater, which exemplify the netprov model to hilarious extremes.

Twitter offers an easy, vernacular platform for collaborative play for a number of reasons. First, play can be easily organized through a #hashtag. Hashtags (the pound symbol followed by astring of letters, numbers, or symbols) are used in Twitter for categorizing Tweets, as a folksonomic tagging system. Users can, in essence, join a conversation by using a hashtag because even people not formally following a user's Tweets will see their posts if running a search on a hashtag. Such a technique is particularly common at academic conferences, but social memes (e.g., #whatmycatateforbreakfast), celebrity names, or even the time of day can serve as hashtags. Second, hashtagging also allows Tweeters the opportunity to devote merely a portion of their Tweets to the play. In other words, if a person is Tweeting on a regular basis, only the Tweets using the hashtag will be collected in the search. As we found in the *LA Flood Project*, discussed at length below, Tweets can be easily timed using any number of buffering services.

RobWittig:

Mark-O, before we get into those details, let's take this out to the big picture:

Mass Media, Internet, Social Media and Personal Media Sources of Netprov

The ongoing search for sources of netprov undoubtedly includes mass media projects, especially as analyzed by Henry Jenkins using the concepts of convergence culture and transmedia. Jenkins defines: "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole….Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption." (Jenkins)

Jenkins' work on fan fiction illuminates the participatory aspect of netprov in a way that supplies pieces of the puzzle missing in the intense analysis of participation that comes out of the game world. Jenkins understands participation motivated by creative imagination more than competition and leveling up. He describes a top-down, media conglomerate movement reaching to meet up with a bottom-up movement on the part of what used to be called consumers. "Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for consumer participation," he says. "At the same time, consumers are using new media technologies to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation, and grassroots creativity." (Jenkins)

The parodic aspect of netprov means that instead of following conventions it often "draws from life" to use the good old visual arts term. This means that an entire range of real life practices on the internet, in social media and personal media (telephone, text message, e-mail) are also used as models and formal sources for netprov. These include:

- vernacular personal communication of all kinds, including text message and Twitter style and spelling,

- personal blogs, websites, podcasts, videocasts of all kinds,

- mass media, corporate and governmental communications of all kinds,

- collaborative collection sites, such as **Passive/Aggressive Notes** which has branched out from its original mission of showing photographs of handwritten, passive/aggressive notes ("Do Not Leave Your Dirty Dishes in

the Sink") to showing bizarre handwritten public notes of all kinds (http://www.passiveaggressivenotes.com)

- and collaborative creative sites, such as **Tweeting Too Hard** "Where self important Tweets get the recognition they deserve." For example: "I gave my cleaning lady a raise today, even though she didn't ask, as my own little contribution to fighting the recession. Tweeted by brettschulte http://Tweetingtoohard.com.

MarkCMarino:

Right, Rob, and don't forget "F*** My Life," which I can only hope is written with a humorous goal in mind. Rather depressing if it's not. Twitter is rather the natural platform for netprov, no? Which reminds me…

You and I have worked both independently and collaboratively on various netprovs, and it would be useful here to review some of them as case studies. My closest work in this area would have to be:

The Ballad of Workstudy Seth

Workstudy Seth

The clearest example of netprov from my writing involved my workstudy student named Seth, whom I hired in 2009 to manage my social media accounts. Seth turned out to be relatively unreliable, taking off for Cabo in Spring Break and, for the purposes of facilitating my social media presence, never returned.

Fri Mar 06 05:30:44 +0000 2009
@markcmarino just hired me as his "social networking" assisstant, sez all i have to do istwitter, facebook, & bookmarx. its a resume builder, seth

Fri Mar 06 05:32:22 +0000 2009
@markcmarino sez i can call him coach, he calls me seth youtube. my names seth yoo. he seems to think he invented that joke, best not pop that bubble

Fri Mar 06 05:34:06 +0000 2009
@markcmarino haz not made real clear my job duties, but sez i might have to give up some evenings cuz he thinks its better to update late at night (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:36:20 +0000 2009
@markcmarino doz not seem to ve cleaned this office in 6-7 semesters, random memo from faculty meeting May 05 i found on hiz desk, not my job 2 care (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:37:04 +0000 2009
@markcmarino jus told me im posting 2 much, need to spread em out, and watch grammar films (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:39:01 +0000 2009
@markcmarino haz a funny way of implying my heart may not be in the work — what ev. (seth)

Fri Mar 06 05:43:12 +0000 2009
@markcmarino is standing over my shoulder correcting my grammar as a write— I write this. thanks (sy)

Fri Mar 06 06:03:28 +0000 2009
@markcmarino sez his work study funds r limited but if i keep up his updates theres one knock-out letter of rec ready 4 when i apply 2 grad skool. (Seth)

Fri Mar 06 06:17:43 +0000 2009
@markcmarino @netwurker marino sed i was to refer to you as mis mez & that i should o*n[l*y t-y+p 2 u in p^nc+08#n m(ar* --will t-e77 him u gave 2 points

Fri Mar 06 06:30:22 +0000 2009
@markcmarino @netwurker (@@)(@@)(@@)(@@)-- im kee7in%a^3y30^u ms. mez -- u=+r!Ky(ok brain hurtz)

During the time he managed my account and Tweeted his saga, those who followed me were faced with dilemma: do they Tweet with Seth or with me and if the latter, how could they convey a message to me through Seth? In the last few lines quoted above, Seth attempts to interact with @netwurker Mez Breeze, the electronic literary artist who Tweets in her signature language mesangelle, which combines code-like symbols with natural language. By chatting with her in this way, Seth brings Mez's performance into the realm of netprov as well.

By the way, I should note that Rob was responsible for my recovery and republication of the Twitter posts from the Seth period, Twitter being a notoriously ephemeral medium. Fortunately, I was able to download my own Twitter archive and excerpt the portion of time that Seth was operating the account.

RobWittig:

Rob's Comments on *WorkStudySeth*

(Puts on his Reviewer's Hat) From March 6th to May 6th 2009 Marino explored multiple modes of netprov in a series of Twitter messages now displayed under the title *The Ballad of WorkStudy Seth* (recently published in SpringGun Press). Starting with the self-introduction of a workstudy student, Seth Yoo, hired to do professor Marino's social network writing the sequence begins as a typical netprov character study of a too-cool student bored with his workstudy job.

But then comes spring break, the piece's second sequence, and Seth takes his mobile device on the road to Cabo. He gets rerouted to Phoenix and there begins an intense story that unrolls over several days. Seth runs out of money, tries to get more through Marino's various online accounts, then falls in with an apparently appealing young Luddite named Noe (later called IP123.42.306.X) who leads Seth to the edge of a remote canyon and to the edge of Seth's attachment/addiction to social media. There is a group gathered at the canyon's rim preparing to throw their electronic devices into the dusty deep. Seth meets folks who all have a story of social media addiction. We readers follow Seth's agony as the time approaches for him to renounce electronic posts and hurl his social connectivity into the void. Will he? Won't he? The canyon story sets *Workstudy Seth* apart from the typical Twitter fiction character study. In it Marino's style gets more concentrated, more power-packed, more, well, literary. With direct references to Mez and the mezangelle style, Marino crafts a hybrid of alphabet-efficient texting slang and poetic practice. Seth's descriptions of the strange scene he is observing and his inner turmoil both become more vivid.

Writing for his subscriber audience of fellow electronic literature folk, Marino need do nothing more than suggest the deep theoretical and historical waters into which Seth peers from his cliff top. The light touch keeps this second sequence perfectly balanced between narrative and theory.

The canyon sequence ends in a silence......which the fictional Marino breaks only to begin the third sequence, wherein Marino tries to repair the damage done by Workstudy Seth and begins to detail his university's judicial review of Marino as the responsible party for Seth's social networking indiscretions. It is at this point that Workstudy Seth, for me, went from being merely good to brilliant and important. Friends and colleagues of Marino's began to tune in and take seriously Marino's supposed tussle with the administration. For example, *hyperrhiz* editor Helen Burgess emailed him just to make sure everything was all right. The fiction had hit home.

At this point in the sequence a fascinating moment in the project's publishing history occurs. An article appears in the Chronicle of Higher Education detailing Marino's project. A careful reader of the Chronicle piece will tune in to the fictional nature of the game but the journalist, Jeff Young's, lead is the idea of a prof hiring a workstudy student to Tweet on his behalf, and some readers missed the cue. In a delicious period of vertigo Marino had to ask himself the questions that accompany authentic experiments with fiction: should I tell them it's fake? Should I let it ride? To his delight, colleagues still occasionally ask him: Was that Seth thing real?

But there's more! Sequence four begins with Marino accepting applications for a new social media workstudy student, and winds up with the bland copycat reTweetPete, who, predictably, does nothing but repeat other Tweets and is unutterably boring compared to Seth.

And then, thank God!, Seth hacks into Marino's account for one last brilliant hurrah, and it's sequence five. It turns out that reTweetPete annoyed Seth more than anyone else. Seth strikes a blow for intelligence and urgency in electronic communication (and he tells the end of the canyon story for good measure) in a flurry of poetic messages.

After some gorgeous sequences of ASCII gibberish as the battle for control of the account ensues, Marino finally manages to eject Seth and re-emerges in his own voice in this wonderfully rhythmic sequence:

> Mon Apr 13 20:32:45
> Hi
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:34:51
> Hi, the real
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:37:25
> Hi, th3 $$ real Mark
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:40:57
> Hi, the real Mark Marino here
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:45:28
> Hi, 7he real Mark Marino *$^here breaking into
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:47:57
> Hi, the real Mark Marino here breaking into my own account using
> Tweetdeck Pro Tool! Whew! I'm back in. And #workstudyseth is out at last!

The project winds down in the sixth sequence into a small coda concerning yet another social media workstudy, the somewhat ditzy searcherCiara. Then Marino elegantly and gradually lets the waves of unremarkable, everyday Tweets cover over the turmoil of the Seth era.

The thing I find so fascinating and appealing about this project is the breezy fluidity with which Marino changes from sequence to sequence – from narrative strategy to narrative strategy. To me the piece has the unmistakable feel of a pioneering piece done early in the "fictionalization" of a vernacular form. There are no conventions yet, no canon. Marino seems to just follow his wit whither it leads, trying a bit of this approach, a bit of that. The casual willingness to ask "what if" and the unrestricted brilliance with which Marino's imagination answers are delightful. Of course Marino's lifetime of creative writing is in evidence, from stylistic nuances to strategic choices. But the feeling that he, and his characters, are simply following their impulses in a search for intense communication and understanding of the world makes the piece memorable.

In this trim, terse line of messages Marino has explored six different narrative strategies, six different approaches to netprov. Several futures of netprov begin here.

MarkCMarino:

Thanks, Rob, though I am beside myself when you posit Seth as a fictional character. Nonetheless, I am constrained by these "Yes, and" shackles. So onto other projects of related interest.

Los Wikiless Timespedia, **LA Flood Project**

Los Wikiless Timespedia

Los Wikiless Timespedia   Prior to my Twitter works of netprov, I frequently developed opportunities for online creative play through Bunk Magazine, an online humor magazine I co-founded and edit. On April 1, 2008, we published The Los Wikiless Timespedia, which took The Los Angeles Times' early problems with wikis, often referred to as the Wikitorial Debacle [12], to its absurd conclusion, by imagining what would happen if the *LA Times* launched an entirely wiki-based newspaper. The issue's initial content was written by Bunk contributors but was situated as an open platform to feature the content of any of Bunk's (or the *LA Times'*s) readers. As a frontpage article explains,

> In a desperate attempt to stop the involuntary leakage of its readership, the slightly less-old gray lady has tried the Depends of new media, embracing a technology that almost spelt its d-e-a-t-h in bright blue hyperlinked Arial....

> "We tried basically all the gimmicks we know," said new Editor-in-Chief Tony Cahter, recently promoted from the depleted typesetting staff. "Different fonts. Moving Marmaduke to the front page. Everything."

Contributors wrote about topics that were important to them from a play on micro-local journalism as a father reports on his son's soccer match to an analysis of economics as seen through an Angelenos front door, as a citizen journalist uses the graffiti on the wall of the foreclosed house next door to report on the emerging global financial crisis. One writer from Norway, Lars Hamson (possibly a pseudonym) reflected on the perceived rift between Norwegians and Swedes as well as his inability to distinguish his Facebook friends form his real friends.

Following the Zeitgeist of Web 2.0 and collaboration, readers could not just post new articles, they could also edit other people's articles. As the declaration article explains, "If you see an article you don't like or don't agree with, just change it. Then if the next person doesn't like that, they can change it back. We call it an editocracy." Since it's launch the project has slowly begun to sediment with the contributions of spam bots, posting Cialis advertisements and the like. Though asynchronous, this project offered an opportunity for writers to play citizen journalists as themselves or others, using vernacular media, and involving current events. They could even include dialogue on the discussion pages of the wiki. However, although participants did create characters and told stories, the overall frame was not primarily fictional or dramatic.

LA Flood Project

Around the time Rob and I were planning Grace, Wit, & Charm, an opportunity to test out some of the technology and methods of netprov arose. At the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books April 30-May 1,2011 at the University of Southern California, I experimented with a netprov portion of the LA Flood Project, a locative narrative that focuses on an epic flood hitting the city of sun and surface written primarily by a collective I belong to known as LAinundacion. For this project, the collective created descriptions of the campus of USC as they were affected by the flood. We would later replicate this experiment during a 7-day period during October 2011 with over 70 participants and thousands of Tweets (archived here). In both runs of the simulaion, any Twitter user could join in the activity merely by adding the hashtag #laflood to their Tweets. I will focus mainly on the Festival of Books simulation.

The main events were Tweeted by @LAFloodProject, but I had established several fictional accounts for the occasion including:

- @ascovelasco: Manny Velasco, LA-based Chicano writer.

- @RevLesRFretten: Rev. Les R. Fretten, African-American preacher

- @usctechmuse: Susan Tetris, Greek-American USC-based IT administrator
- @savvydean: Anglo-American perpetual n00b Dean of the fictitious Neumann College at USC
- @troyconkwestppd: Arab-American Public Policy and Development undergrad at USC

Each character had made about a week's worth of posts and had already begun following people on Twitter and gaining followers, which was an important way to characterize a fictional Twitter user and to spread the piece itself. As with any real-life Twitter-user, you can find out a lot about a person by whom they choose to follow, reTweet, et cetera. At some point, the @LAFloodProject account encouraged people to play along, which meant that the fictional characters did not have to totally expose themselves, since they might be just trying out the experiment.

Participants took both comic and more serious routes, roughly synching their Tweets with the states of the flood presented in the main @LaFloodProject account. This real-time collaboration gave a *War of the Worlds* feel to the project, though the experience was probably closer to LARPing since it encouraged open participation rather than top-down storytelling. Rob joined in the activity even though he was over a thousand miles away at the time.

The *LA Flood Project* actually led to some real life confusion. When fictional character Manny Velasco (@ascovelasco) mentioned the rain falling in the morning, one of his followers expressed dismay as she was driving up from San Diego where there was not a cloud in the sky. When Robert Rex Waller, Jr. (@iseehawksinla) claimed the parking lots were flooded, the USC Parking Twitter account denied this claim. When I Tweeted, "Just saw Mark Danielewski show people how to take apart a stack of traditional novels and turn them into rain hats #laflood #latfob," the message was reTweeted, and to my surprise, Danielewski himself began following my Twitter account.

This preliminary experiment under the name of netprov proved to me that Twitter was an excellent platform for netprov and that hashtags at once could serve as an Internet meme, an easily obtained (forged) passport into the project, and a marker of the performance's boundaries. It also proved just how powerful buffered Tweeting could be in establishing plot points in a netprov using multiple accounts. For that piece I primarily used CoTweet, the same tool Rob and I would use in *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

RobWittig:

Invisible Seattle and IN.S.OMNIA

My formative experiences in netprov were with the literary performance group Invisible Seattle[13] and it's early computer bulletin board system IN.S.OMNIA. Mark has more to say about them, but I'll introduce them here; a nice web presentation is now available at invisibleseattle.net.

Invisible Seattle

Inspired by tales of Dada performance and Surrealist expeditions, fans of the Oulipo, and enamored of a vision of intellectual life in the cafes of Paris—the early '80s group Invisible Seattle was my first experience of elements of netprov. Combining literary aspirations with backgrounds in skit comedy and political guerilla theater, the group's projects used publications, posters and performance to promote the generative notion of an invisible Seattle coexisting with the visible one – a smarter, more aware, more free, more real city accessed by the imagination. "Every time you read a book, you enter Invisible Seattle" went the early catch phrase. In the role of "literary workers" we devised a scheme for the citizens to help write the great novel of Seattle the city deserved. We dressed in overalls with words stenciled on them and hard hats with question marks, interviewed citizens on the street, in bars, in coffeehouses – "Excuse me, we're building a novel. May we borrow a few of your words?" – and created a vivid snapshot of Seattle in the summer of 1983, the book *Invisible Seattle, the Novel of Seattle, by Seattle* .

IN.S.OMNIA

In the wake of the Novel of Seattle project, in the autumn of 1983, our group of Invisibles began to write on one of the earliest literary electronic bulletin boards, IN.S.OMNIA (Invisible Seattle's Omnia). Very rapidly we discovered many of enduring modes of electronic fiction: multiple screen names, fake "real selves," tactics of timing and pacing, the heady pleasure of instant publication and the courage of anonymity.

MarkCMarino:

Mark's Comments on IN.S.OMNIA

In *Invisible Rendezvous,* the Rob describes the IN.S.OMNIA message board, an ambitious yet iconoclastic vision of the future (and past) of writing. This bulletin board-centered collective, dating back to 1983, espoused the virtues of collaboration, not just in the death of the romantic individual author, but his swift and merciful euthanasia, in favor of writing that aims not to create objects of elite, high art, but works emerging through the dialogic and generative processes of networked human communication. Rob wrote *Invisible Rendezvous* in a moment when post-structuralism was flourishing and where canons were falling or being pushed into the sea. He frequently cites Derrida and Bakhtin, the same theorists filling the bibliographies of scholarship from the Modern Language Association and, more pertinently, George Landow's early treatise on electronic writing, *Hypertext*.

And while the documenters of the "digital divide" will no doubt trace the exclusiveness of early computing environs, the IN.S.OMNIA message board coalesced from a radically populist writing ethos, one that would flourish twenty years later in the Web 2.0 proliferation of user-generated content sites.

In the introduction to the book, Philip Wohlstetter *Invisible Seattle* collaborator if not front man, offers a revision of the story of Homer writing the works that are generally attributed to him. His point is that the name Homer effaces the work of countless collaborators who have since been forgotten beneath the myth of the sole author. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise to find a collective that eschewed its own notoriety, whose sense of ownership of texts seems to be as "invisible" as the city they pursue. Rob writes, "we too have fond memories of the old neighborhood: the attractive genius, the typeset masterpiece, the obedient reader" (77), but all their new project, one enabled by networked collaboration would cut through the fog of those nostalgic fantasies. This spirit of art emerging from collaborative play rather than individual acts of planned and plotted genius is at the core of netprov, growing directly out of improv, that insistence that the audience shape performance, the belief that the stage is served less by pre-hearsed scripts and more by in-the-moment problem solving, constraints met by collaborators engaged in processes.

It is a moment, too, born of technologies of relative open access compared to the heavily gated book publishing world. During *Invisible Seattle* the collective imagined the potential use of computers. As Rob notes, "The computer was a happy solution to problems [my collaborators] had begun to pose long before" (77). In the last section of *Invisible Seattle*, Rob seems to call forth the very collaborative software he would later use in his netprov projects:

Let's finally see a bulletin board that will capture the rhythm of composition—the pauses, false starts, erasures. Imagine a user signing on under a pseudonym and copying a message, already written out in longhand, onto the system—putting in false pauses, fake corrections, just for effect. (170)

The description seems to describe the very bulletin board later used by the writers during IN.S.OMNIA yet is also uncannily similar to the Twitter feeds of *Grace, Wit, & Charm,* embodying that ethos of the literary simulation of spontaneity, the careful production of the casual utterance. Yet that casual utterance isn't the expression of one's deepest soul, but a collaborative charade, a improvised performance.

The heart of netprov, then, is the disruption of the contract that links every user to every utterance, this sense that each netizen will have exactly one self, again the end user terms of Facebook. Rob's radical project is to shatter the one-to-one model with a several-to-many notion: "Instead of the one-human-being-to-one-self-to-one-voice equation, a typical IN.S.OMNIA project might be charted as including seven human beings, twelve selves, and fifteen voices" (155). He raises this insanely playful question: "What if the self and the voice, or the selves and voices are rotisserie leagues of each other" (155). Such metaphors reveal Rob's project to be much more than just an experiment in collaborative authorship but moreso a provocation about the conventional stories of authorship.

However, these anticipatory writings about networked collaborations do not merely describe the abstract notions that will become netprov; they foretell the form of netprov. Rob describes a writing collective in which writers approximate "a group of comic impersonators who share a pool of voices that each can do with a greater or lesser effect" (155). *Grace, Wit, & Charm* followed that description literally as the comedy improv team of performers and authors took on the roles of the characters onstage and through authoring lines for various characters through Twitter.

But, Rob, you should IN.S.OMNIA was really on the beginning. It is in your other works that this form of writing rappidly evolves in so many directions like an e-lit Galapagos.

RobWittig:

Friday's Big Meeting, Blue Company, Chicago Soul Exchange

That's right, Mark. I did not come suddenly to netprov. I did a series of projects that got progressively more netprov-like, until I arrived at the fully-featured netprovs of the present day. The following projects were the major points on my trajectory.

Friday's Big Meeting

Into the web era, my 2000 web fiction *Friday's Big Meeting* purported to be the full record of 5 days' worth of writing—public and private—in a struggling web company's proprietary chat room. Entirely pre-written, the five pages were published over five work days and publicized as a performance. (Wittig "Friday's Big Meeting")

Blue Company

My novel in e-mail *Blue Company* was performed twice, in 2001 and 2002, by sending out roughly an e-mail a day for a month to subscribers. Pre-plotted and substantially pre-written, this was the first project I had done that included current events. http://www.robwit.net/bluecompany2002 To my delight, Scott Rettberg responded to and/or contradicted *Blue Company* by continuing the lives of the characters in his *Kind of Blue*, http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/frame/kOb/index.html.

Blue Company was my first exposure to the exquisite excitement and stress of creating, managing and, well... "living" characters in real time. I know you know that experience too, Mark. The life of netprov is obsessive, elated and sleep-deprived. Knowing that an audience is following the story in real time gives me a deep feeling of both creative power and responsibility. Others are already invested in the characters. Their opinions count. I have to do right by them (both the characters and the audience)... but I have no time to make a balanced judgment. The next installment is due... now! Added to that is the vertiginous fun of making brand new decisions in a brand new creative form. You can rely on previous models, but only to a certain extent. "How does a novel in e-mail end?" I asked myself. "How the heck should I know? Let's try this," I answered. I took Scott's continuation as an indication I had made a good choice.

Chicago Soul Exchange

2010's *Chicago Soul Exchange* was a blog-based fiction that unrolled during a weeklong performance. The project's premise is based on the assertion that there are more human beings alive now than the sum total of human beings who have lived before, making it arithmetically impossible for everyone now to have a past life. I posited the existence of an online secondary market in past lives – a spectral eBay – called Chicago Soul Exchange, and I imagined its proprietor, the kindly and confused PastLifeMaven.

With the help of an inner circle of collaborators the story unfolded in timed blog entries and in comments and bidding on the online Catalog of Past Lives. Outside readers of the project could bid on lives, make comments and help advance the

story if they were so inclined. *Chicago Soul Exchange* currently awaits reformatting and archiving before it can be seen again.

MarkCMarino:

It's amazing, Rob, how each of these projects plays on its medium or Internet milieu in ways that are more than just pragmatic, more than merely using it as a platform. You are interrogating/parodying/satirizing these modes of communication even as you are extending their potential use. But none of these projects were as obviously netprov-y as the next one.

RobWittig:

Grace, Wit & Charm: **Full-Featured Netprov**

Website: http://gracewitandcharm.com
Twitter Log: http://bit.ly/gracewitandcharmTweets/

That's right, Mark. Now we come to *Grace, Wit & Charm,* which is still fresh in my mind. Here's how I set it up.

The Set-Up of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

A promotional announcement mailed and Tweeted on May 1st, 2011 read:

> In just two weeks, you'll get a chance to peek behind the curtain of the under-ground success that's sweeping the virtual world. Grace,Wit&Charm™ — the net's premiere character enhancement plugin — is pleased to invite you to our Online Open House, May 14th – 29th on the web at gracewitand-charm.com, and in Twitter @GWaC. And come join us in the live audience for the two exhibitions streamed from Teatro Zuccone on May 17th & 24th. Bring your cell phone and keep it turned on! What's all the fuss about? Grace™ helps

our clients' avatars battle better, dance better, and even shrug-causually-with-a-winning-smile-and-a-wise-twinkle-in-the-eye better! Wit™ allows the "online you" to deflect attention from your foibles while deftly landing a zinger! And Charm™…ohhhhh, Charmmm…brings out the inner Romantic you never knew was inside you… . . . because it wasn't!! Like so many others, you and your personality need the Turbo-Boost only Grace,Wit&Charm™ can provide."

Synopsis of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

What readers found on the website, on Twitter, and in the theater, was the hardworking day shift team of the Duluth, Minnesota Grace, Wit & Charm call center: Sonny, Laura, Deb and Neil, and their slavedriver boss Bob. The team had been working 12 hours a day, seven days a week since November (the company's reaction to the bad economy) and was totally surprised to be suddenly identified as the Open House Team, and to have all their Tweets and blog posts be made public.

At the call center, when Wit (humor) and Charm (romance) problems came in, the team members wrote solutions on their smart phones and wisecracked about each others work. When Grace (avatar motion) problems came in, the team members, always clad in motion-capture suits, leapt into the motion capture grid to pantomime their solutions. And the whole time Bob the Manager is urging them to more productivity as the team competed with their hated rival team in Shreveport for the prize of the Team Vacation.

The Grace, Wit & Charm team was professional. But the team was tired, the team was grumpy, the team (like so many employees) had to live its personal life at work. Between solving customer problems, the close-knit group helped Laura manage her love life, helped Deb deal with her houseful of kids, helped Neil accept the fact that his military contractor wife in Afghanistan had been cheating on him, and helped Sonny prepare for the Grand Nationals of his beloved sport: remote control model snowmobile racing. Three-day sub-plots featuring different characters overlapped and interwove over the course of the two weeks.

The two live shows were designed to showcase crucial moments of multiple subplots. The first live show established Laura and Sonny as a power duo for solving romantic problems. After struggling with her on-again, off-again boyfriend the whole show, Laura decided to become a GW&C customer and officially request Sonny's help in wooing the boyfriend. Sonny was torn between his personal scorn for the boyfriend and his professional pride.

By the second live show the team was doing more and more of the new, health-care based work, virtually tending to shut-ins and performing small, online medical procedures. Only Sonny seemed to have some qualms about doing the medical work without any training. By contrast, in her Tweets during the week Deb had

shown herself to be more than enthusiastic, finally seeing a chance to live out her frustrated dream of being a physician. Well, a veterinarian. During the second show, Deb was scheduled for her first real online surgery – a carpal tunnel job. Neil, who had been suffering from carpal tunnel woes for days, asked Laura to imitate Deb's motions and perform the surgery on him for real. This was his only option, since the company wasn't providing health care. The final tableaux of the double surgery – one virtual on the motion capture grid and one live on stage, ended the performance.

The final days of the project saw the realization of the romance between Neil and Laura and their elopement into a virtual world in which Laura had long been a high priestess, and the rescue of one of Deb's kids from video game addiction. The new flood of medical assignments started to include more end-of-life, hospice care, at which Sonny showed his subtle skill. Our Duluth team wound up losing the contest for the Team Vacation by a hair to Shreveport, but Bob relented and arranges for them all to join Neil and Laura in a virtual holiday.

The last words of the project were as Sonny and the team said goodbye to a dying client/patient and goodbye to the readers. When, where and how does a netprov end? It's difficult for me to say with any certainty. As lead writer, it was emotionally "over" for me in some way when I sent the final message. But, like all archived literature, it lives on for new readers.

The Form of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

In terms of the list of characteristics of netprov, above, *Grace, Wit and Charm* was:

Prose fiction: If *Chicago Soul Exchange* was intended to be "novella sized," *Grace, Wit & Charm* was intended to have the breadth, depth and heft of a novel.

In Vernacular Media—*Grace, Wit & Charm reached* its audience via coordinated, transmedia use of thirteen media modes:

1. e-mail promotion,
2. Facebook promotion,
3. a placeholder/promotional website (before May 14th, 2011),
4. a fictional business website (after May 14th, 2011),
5. direct Twitter subscription or "following" of the five main characters,
6. following the Twitter hashtag #GWandC,
7. widgets on the fictional business website showing the most recent Tweets from four of the characters,
8. a blog with comments on the fictional business website,

9. linking to a Twitter group that followed the five main characters from a page of the fictional business website,

10. linking to a hashtag archive at the website TwapperKeeper,

11. two hour-long live performances at Teatro Zuccone, a professional theater in Duluth, Minnesota,

12. live web streaming of the Teatro Zuccone shows,

13. streaming archival video of the performances.

In Real Time: Mark, the four actors and I used the Twitter text management website CoTweet to time the release of the texts precisely…unless, as sometimes happened, I messed up and sent out messages immediately instead of setting the timing for them to appear later. In a word: oops.

Often Parodic and Satirical: Besides lampooning topics such as embodiment and disembodiment in networked living, online romance, and game addiction, the project pointedly looked at the health care crisis in the U.S.

Partially Pre-written and Partially Improvised: GW&C was 90% pre-plotted in a sequence of three-day-long, overlapping sub-plots which I dubbed "three day tizzies" involving all five main characters and an overall character/plot arc: Neil and Laura fall in love and elope to her virtual world. Line-by-line writing was done approximately 60% in advance and 40% on the day of online or social-media publication.

Transmedia: The simultaneous use of all the vernacular media listed above makes the project eminently transmedia.

Participatory: I developed the fictional frame tale, wrote the initial scenarios and character descriptions. Characters and scenarios were workshopped and elaborated by Mark Marino and the four experienced actors: Jamie Harvie, Gary Kruchowski, Cathy Podeszwa, Shannon Szymkowiak. writer/actor/director Jean Sramek wrote dialog for different characters and was the director/stage manager for the live performances. While not formally a troupe, many of these actors had worked together before; Shannon was for years a professional improv actor in Minneapolis. Mark also has some improv training. Writer Margi Preus gave notes on the scenarios and the live show, and writer friends Chris Julin, Catherine Winter, Scott Rettberg, Paul Cabarga and Tom Grothus contributed problems and solutions in advance and during the performance request. I was the graphic design director of the website and other aspects of the project. Artist Joellyn Rock did stage design, costume design and digital art for the website and the back-projection on stage. Designers Laura LaBounty and David Roberts created the GW&C website. Designers Matt Olin and Eric Stykel contributed illustrations. Other writing for problems and solutions came in from unknown pseudonymous web and Twitter contributors.

Performed and then Archived: As of this writing the creation of the web archive of the project is in progress. Currently, the Twitter feeds can be accessed through a TwapperKeeper log.

Characters Portrayed Physically by Modeling and Acting: The four actors adopted their characters wholeheartedly. One of my best memories of the performance weeks was how quickly and seemingly effortlessly the actors would drop into character and riff on themes from the project, in rehearsal or around a restaurant table. The mugshot images of the characters on the website and in the Twitter feeds are key to the impact of the project.

Designed for Episodic and Incomplete Reading: With thirteen parallel modes of communication, each reader was able to remix the piece at will. Given the simultaneous communication modes, A "complete" reading of Grace, Wit & Charm is impossible, given simultaneous communication modes.

Included Current Events: A few references to current events were included, but breaking news didn't play a huge part of the story.

MarkCMarino:

Mark's First Few Reflections on the Experience/Experiment
of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Grace, Wit,& Charm was the most extensive netprov project I'd worked on to date when measured by the intensity of the time commitment before and during the two weeks it ran, the sheer complexity of the multiple interwoven storylines with their serialized structures, as well as the added surprises of audience interaction. As such, it stands a useful case study for netprovs to come.

Audience Participation

Originally the part of the project that interested me most was the opportunity for real-time audience participation both via the Twitter feeds and during the live show. Since I was off the clock in Los Angeles during the live shows (not Tweting as Neil), I found myself writing job requests for the team. But since we had already begun the convention of using dummy Twitter accounts, I found myself quickly opening

new accounts for characters and Tweeting requests. During the first show, I was watching with an audience at the ePoetry conference in Buffalo, sitting next to the current Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) President Nick Montfort and digital poet and ELO Board member Stephanie Strickland, whowould feed me requests that I would submit as masked Twitterers. The fun of watching the improv troupe try to handle these requests in real-time showed me that this extension of the theater to the long-distance audience is clearly the future of staged improv.

During the Twitter streams throughout the two weeks, audience members would also write in with requests and interact with the characters, such as @civicminded1, a heart-on-her-Tweets, politically engaged netizen, who would offer feedback for the employees on their latest interactions. Also, there were a few crossovers, when, for example, SavvyDean from the LA Flood Project Tweets chimed in. While I expected a larger number of participants, the project did again prove the ease of development for netprov on Twitter.

Writing Dialogue in Twitter

One of the challenges to using microblogging platforms to write narratives is akin to the main challenge of humor itself: timing. Having to Tweet in real-time can be a thrilling constraint but limits story possibilities, especially if you are not writing for a project full-time. Also, it makes dialogue between multiple characters written by the same person practically impossible, like a very cumbersome kind of ventriloquism act. As I discovered during the LA Flood Project simulation, CoTweet would enable us to buffer our Tweets and time dialogue across multiple characters and accounts. That meant we could not only stage dialogues that would happen at certain times, but we could also have characters make posts simultaneously, pushing their twitversations out of sync, something that replicates real-life Tweeting much more closely. Unbeknownst to Rob, I would also use additional buffering services when I wanted to schedule surprises for him, since he had access to the characters in the CoTweet account. Being able to time Tweets also allowed us to establish a verisimilitude that was unprecedented in online storytelling, since many people in our audience did not know that Tweets could be buffered.

I should note, following the model of netprov, the main action was sketched out but only a portion of the lines were written in advance. There were many times where a pre-written dialogue would be unfolding while Rob and I were handling live comments that were coming through the Twitter feed. This multiplicity of conversation threads seemed to match Twitter usage as people often make mini-digressions even as they reply to other Tweets all mixed together. As Rob mentioned, the speed and shear number of accounts often led to errors. Sometimes we would Tweet a line from the wrong character, no doubt in part due to managing multiple accounts at the same time both buffered and in real-time. Of course, that

kind of slippage is part of what makes Improv so much fun. That's my excuse, at least.

 RobWittig:

Rob's First Few Reflections on the Experience/Experiment
of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

What is "The Real Thing?"

During *Grace, Wit & Charm* sometimes I found myself thinking that the performance was the most important part of the project – the "real thing" –and that the archive was going to be a pale imitation, a "mere" documentary video of a stage show. Then the next moment I would find myself thinking that the archive was the real thing, and that all we were doing was allowing some folks to observe the writing process. It really depended on whom I was asking – internally (among my multiple selves) and externally. Theater people, predictably, thought of the theater shows as the real thing. Web artists thought of the website as the real thing. Writers thought of the archive as the real thing. It is exciting to me that there is no definitive answer at this, early, moment in the life of the art form. I'm curious to see which mode – which cultural milieu – might eventually hold sway.

The Writer/Actor

One of the findings that jumped out during *Grace, Wit & Charm* was the intriguing role of the Writer/Actor. The Duluth actors who improved the live shows, wrote some Tweets, and modeled for the web photos of the four main characters wound up truly adopting their characters and began to write some pieces of text in character during the performance period. The one exception, by happy happenstance, was the actor whose character was already largely being written by Mark Marino. Even though Mark was not the public face of the character Neil, Mark created a masked video to include in the project (http://bit.ly/zumbaneil). The closest models for the writer/actor I know are the film writer/actor, the improv or skit comedy actor who writes her own material for a character she has developed or, again, the live-action role-player.

Holographic Narrative

Perhaps netprov needs to be **holographic** in its narrative structure. That is to say that the whole narrative should probably be retold in miniature in every beat. Since the readers can enter from any direction at any time, the writing needs to be constantly repeating exposition as it delivers the current installment. While remixing some of Mark's drafts and composing new writing I found myself making Neil and the other characters say "my wife" "Neil's wife" "your wife" instead of "her" so that it's very plain who's being discussed.

MarkCMarino:

The End of Act I

Well, said, Rob, but I think I hear the music playing, sending us out into the commercial break. Let me see if I can wrap up a bit.

Netprov does not represent a sudden shift of online entertainment and play but rather arrives as the slacking heir to a rich tradition of theatrical computer-mediated play and real-time collaborative performance. It builds upon the history of impersonation and obfuscation in online networked communication that was perhaps more familiar in early chatrooms and bulletin boards such as IN.S.OMNIA than the verified and authenticated identities of the Facebook era. It draws upon the techniques of collaborative writing that long pre-date the dawn of computers and borrows from the spirit of parlour games from days when even a corset did not get in the way of clever word play among friends. What is crystallized in netprov, however, is the opportunity to collaborate with other writers in the very space where we put in our hours at work; the stage is the very screen on the desk in the cubicle. So it is fitting that one of the early works ushering in this form is clothed in the language and culture of a contemporary Internet start-up, in the awkward suits and skirts of an office comedy. Though netprov borrows the energy of spontaneity of traditional theatrical improvisation, because of the text-based relay technologies, it offers the opportunity to add dialogue with more resonance than the free-flowing vernacular from the top of the actor's head. Call it studied improv, or even literary improv. In this way, netprov hearkens equally to the writing games of the Oulipo and to the games of Chicago-style short-form improv. Finally, since it seeks to outlive its performances, netprov is often allowed the indulgence of editorial embellishments and fixes not typically afforded a live stage show. Growing out of both a theatrical and computer-mediated improvisational traditions, netprov continues to emerge into a powerful genre of online collaborative performance. Let the games continue!

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— and Mark C. Marino. "Netprov – Networked Improv Literature At." *WRT: Writer Response Theory* 12 May 2011. Web. 29 June 2011.

Notes

1. In his history of Second City, Mike Thomas writes of even the earliest days of Second City, "The post-intermission portion (of the show) was improvised using audience suggestions. New scene were born thusly, and eventually new shows. The formula – diluted though it became when writing nudged out improvisation as the primary method of invention – would serve Second City well in decades to come".

2. Following the programmed script of a Rogerian psychotherapis, Weizenbaum's ELIZA was the first computer-based conversation agent, a system which allowed interactors to participate in a therapy scene, though they might not have thought of their input as a performance. See Turkle's *Life on the Screen*.

3. Uren draws mostly upon his own experience and the writing of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone.

4. Derived from an actual Second City course taken by Mark in the summer of 1996.

5. See Peter Consenstein's 1995 essay "Memory and Oulipian Constraints."

6. Laurel explicitly raises the notion of the interface as a dramatic stage (18-19).

7. By this token, Sherry Turkle's Life on the Screen presents case studies in improvised scenes between humans and conversation agents, though the humans do not always realize they are playing.

8. And I have argued as much in my dissertation, I, Chatbot.

9. According to a 2010 study by Sysomos only 29% of Tweets produced a response (a reTweet or a reply), with only 19% producing reTweets.

10. Jason Kotke has compiled a list of some samples of the Twitter Hulks here: http://kottke.org/10/12/the-twitter-hulks

11. Thanks to Julie Levin Russo for pointing us toward this practice.

12. This 2005 AP story details the rise and fall of an experiment to employ a wiki for more interactive editorial pages, an experiment that ended in revert wars and pornography http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8300420/ns/technology_and_science/t/los-angeles-times-suspends-wikitorials/

13. Further information about Inivisble Seattle can be found in Rob Wittig's other contribution to this issue