Wittig, Rob, and Mark C. Marino. "Come Play Netprov!: Recipes for an Evolving Practice." *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, & Practices*. By James O'Sullivan. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 303–315. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501363474.ch-027>>.

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Come Play Netprov!: Recipes for an Evolving Practice

Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino

Netprov is internet improv. Omnivorous in their reappropriation, netprov artists hijack whatever media are being used currently for private, friend-group, and public communications to enact fictional characters, spur-of-the-moment satires, and carefully planned speculative narratives. Shaped, planned, and nurtured, a netprov is facilitated by netrunners, but they are not alone. In our (Mark and Rob's) evolving terminology, "netrunners" plan and produce netprovs, "featured players" collaborate with the netrunners and carefully craft their characters and participation, and "players" from far and wide drop in and play for a short or long time, leaving their mark on the shape of the collaborative creation.

Make a Twitter account for your high-school self and attend school with everyone who's ever lived! Pretend to go without technology for a week and share the hell out of it via social media! Live-tweet an imaginary TV show with fellow super-fans! These are some of our recent netprov invitations to "play and go deep" as our motto goes.

The irresistible creative impulse to take a brand new form of written/pictorial communication designed for practical use and perform a silly, serious, satirical character voice within it is something we (Mark and Rob) share with each other, and with other creators (such as Laurence Sterne and Tina Fey) throughout time. Netprov brings literary and theatrical traditions into electronic network. Digital, netprov-like projects have been going on since the beginnings of the internet and proliferate today.

Writing netprov with others is an exhilarating creative challenge and a ton of fun. We'd love you to try it—with us or with your friends! To that end we're going to define the form, talk a little about what netprov players bring to the common playspace from their different fields, and share the recipes for a few of our most recent netprov.

Characteristics of Netprov

The basic catalog of formal elements of netprov that Rob outlined in his master's work at the University of Bergen is useful:

Netprov is networked improv narrative. Netprov creates stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

Netprov uses multiple media simultaneously. Netprov is collaborative and incorporates participatory contributions from readers. Netprov is experienced as a performance as it is published; it is read later as a literary archive. During the performance, netprov projects incorporate breaking news. Netprov projects use actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create. Netprov is often parodic and satirical. Some netprov projects require writer/actors and readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities. Netprov is designed for episodic and incomplete reading.

Although netprov is always fiction, not all netprov are what might be called "story based." Some netprov are character-based tableaux, like an improv theater skit, in which the plot events serve mostly to heighten the character studies. Others are language arts games with no necessary time sequence. Netprov narratives with a strong story are holographic in structure, which means that the basic fiction and the overarching narrative must be constantly re-told so that readers dropping in at any time can be brought up to speed and invited to play effectively.

What World Do You Come From?

Netprov lies at the intersection of literature, theater and performance, mass media (film and television), games (in particular, Alternate Reality Games [ARGs], in which players physically enact roles and compete in real life), avant-garde visual arts (in galleries and museums), and born-digital internet, personal media, and social media practices. What has become clear to us is

the importance of the methods and attitudes people trained in these various fields bring with them to the netprov space.

When Is a Netprov Finished?

Our interest in methods is not merely theoretical. Methods from different worlds impact practical decisions about netprovs in progress. For example, say we've just finished a netprov such as *I Work For the Web*, in which players are encouraged to become self-aware about the daily media practices they perform that generate income for corporations (browsing, "likes," "favorites," etc.) and complain about them like a job. What becomes of the netprov once the initial play period is over? From a traditional, literary point of view the text has been composed and the archive is ready to be read as a finished work. From a theater point of view, one performance has been given and an unlimited number of repeat performances of the same scenario can now be produced. From a film and TV point of view, the first iteration is viewed as Season One, and it's time to plan Season Two, which tracks the same characters from exactly the point in the story where the first iteration left off. From a game point of view, multiple versions of the same scenario can be re-staged simultaneously, at any time, with new groups of players. From a visual arts point of view the same scenario can be re-enacted, with site- and time-specific variations, upon the next offer of patronage from a gallery or museum. Finally, from the point of view of digital culture any of these options can be accommodated and new options added, such as the continuation of the characters' story in real time, with a real-time lag since the last performance, a porting of the story to a new media platform, or the migration of the same characters to an entirely different netprov scenario.

How Should a Netprov Relate to its Audience?

Attitudes toward audience from the tributary worlds of netprov vary widely. As a sketch for a future in-depth study, we will outline some of the differences.

The relationship between authors and readers in the literary world still bears the marks of print-era hierarchy and one-way communication. Authors are on a pedestal. Authors lead, and readers follow. Best-selling authors are a brand representing a reliable mental experience that is always different in particulars, but not necessarily new in form and strategy. Genre fiction authors are expected to stay quite close to their models. Avant-garde authors are expected to lead into new territory, but stay only a step ahead of their readers. Theater also has its mainstream and avant-garde, but in

general, giving an engaging experience to the audience—whether they knew they wanted it or not—is the common goal. Mass media, because of production costs, is focused on audience metrics and is compelled to follow public tastes wherever they lead, even as creators try to shape those tastes.

The game world's attitude toward audience couldn't be more different from the literary world's. In the game world, the audience is on the pedestal, and the creators are humble servants. Game creators are obsessed with reaching out a friendly hand to their audience, pleasing their users and keeping their players happily on task. The pleasure of play guides creative decisions. The visual art world, because of its unique history (i.e., the most radical Modernism became the mainstream, which it did not in any other of the arts) embodies the opposite extreme. Visual artists, as a useful overgeneralization, are often still treated as high Romantic geniuses and do not reach out to their audience. If museum goers do not understand the work, it is considered the audience's fault, rather than a lack of good communication on the part of the creator, as it would be considered in other fields.

Born-digital audiences are no longer audiences at all. They are content creators. (Let's not use the cringeworthy web moniker "prosumers.") They donate creative energy and marketing data to savvy companies with every move they make, since every gesture can be tabulated. Facebook, for example, is simply a display mechanism for user-created narrative. Digital audiences think of themselves as drifting from pleasure to pleasure at the same time as they complain about their lost time. Digital audiences already fulfill the dreamy, then-impossible ideal of theorists such as Roland Barthes. Everyone is an author; no one is a reader.

How to reconcile these different attitudes? In our current experimental netprov formula, the netrunners lead with the basic concept and overarching narrative in the literary mode, collaboration is organized in the film/TV production mode, the featured players aim to please in the theater mode, and players participate in a born-digital social media mode. Very recently we've created new roles in the audience-friendly game mode: Player-Care Coordinator and Featured-Player-Care Coordinator, whose job it is to reach out and encourage players, providing feedback as a reward to good creativity.

Rob: How do netprovs work? Mark, should we demonstrate for them?

Mark: Oh, you're writing all of this down now—everything I say?

Rob: Well, it seemed like a good moment to switch to dialogue.

Mark: Beleaguering Boogers.

Rob: Focus.

Mark: Oh, right. The projects we're about to mention can be found archived at meanwhilenetprov.com—the hub of the hubbub of our netprov activity.

An Unreal Reality Show: SpeidiShow: SpeidiShow, a Netprov (2013)

Rob: Why don't we start with SpeidiShow?

Mark: Okay, maybe you should explain the idea behind this idea.

Rob: Sure, but first, tell folks who Speidi are.

Mark: Um, I think they know. Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag. I mean, they're Reality TV stars. *The Hills? The Hills, New Beginnings? Celebrity Big Brother UK? I'm a Celebrity, Get me out of Here!*

Rob: Okay, good. So they were already familiar with the pseudo-real world of popular performance. For future readers who have no idea what Reality TV is ... it's a genre of television programming featuring performers who are "real people" who are just living their lives or participating in challenges and contests.

Mark: Wait, Rob, "real people?" Scare quotes?

Rob: Well, they are real people, but they are performing in segments that are at minimum staged if not also full-out scripted.

Mark: You're blowing my mind!

Rob: Anyway, Spencer and Heidi are Reality TV stars.

Mark: Indeed, and we'd already worked with them before on Tempspence (aka Reality, being @SpencerPratt), a netprov in which we pretended to be an obscure British poet who had found Spencer's phone, and hence his Twitter account.

Rob: So in the role of Tempspence, as his fans dubbed him, we proceeded to play Surrealist-inspired poetry games with his followers and narrate the poet's fictional romantic life.

Mark: Yes, that netprov went on for about three weeks, and tempted Spencer to play again with us that same year. So we pitched SpeidiShow.

Rob: The basic premise built on something I'd been doing with my students, where we'd all pretend we were watching some television show that doesn't exist and would react to the events on the show, live tweeting a show that doesn't exist. So we brought that model into SpeidiShow, creating a fictional Reality show of Reality shows for Spencer and Heidi.

Mark: And by that we mean that the fictional "SpeidiShow" takes on a different format each week. One week they're giving marital advice, which funny because on *The Hills* and for a time after played out a dysfunctional relationship—while in real life, they're a very close couple. The next week, they'd engaged in competitive yoga.

Rob: The "Show" aired once a week on Thursdays, and during that hour, we and our featured players, choosing a variety of roles, pretended we were either on it, producing it, or watching it.

Mark: Meanwhile, during the week, we'd tweet the stories of the various characters involved in the show, including Spencer and Heidi, getting tangled in behind-the-scenes drama as they prepped that week's episode.

Rob: The show was wild. I remember our haunted Big Brother house episode in which the ghost of Gertrude Stein made an appearance.

Mark: And then there was ... the Aura Baby.

Rob: Oh, my, yes.

Mark: So we created this idea of an "aura baby" that is the progeny of two people's auras. Heidi desperately wanted an aura baby. Spencer needed some convincing. During the netprov, Twitter followers witnessed a public conception.

Rob: Right The Immacu-Twit Conception. *New York Magazine* picked up the story and seemed to enjoy the joke, speculating about what to give at an Aura Baby shower. In our Speidi project, the tabloids and more serious press acted as another participant in the netprov.

Mark: I guess our Speidi work made us think a lot about celebrity, but more specifically this class of Reality celebrity who is trapped in a purgatory of perpetually publicly performing.

Rob: Precisely! Because Reality celebrities are amplified versions of all of us in social media.

Rob: Right, we kept returning to puns about "keeping it real."

Mark: At the same time we were making it up—exaggerating the antics that Spencer and Heidi had begun but taking it to an absurd level, like chasing down leads with Winnie the Pooh.

Rob: Or engaging in espionage as they hunted for the disappearing bees.

Mark: Some of Speidi's followers got it. But others on Twitter seemed to prefer the simpler storylines of Bad Spencer and Superficial Heidi.

Rob: Meh.

#1wknotech (2014, 2015)

Rob: A lot of our netprovs come out of our reflections on contemporary anxieties. For examples, I teach a drawing class, and I noticed that my students' sketchbooks were full of scenes of their friends, sitting together in lounges and dorm rooms, hanging out together by staring at their smartphones. And you notice the same thing, right, Mark?

Mark: We're getting a lot of Likes right now on that Facebook post.

Rob: Exactly. But remember your story, about hiking?

Mark: Oh, right. So I like to go hiking—you know, totally out of the hubbub of the city—off away from where I can even get cellphone coverage—and I have a REALLY good carrier. Anyway, so I hike up

- this mountain and get to this peak with dropdead gorgeous views. Valleys. Ocean. Trees. You can see it all, and I think—Yes, this is peaceful. I am unplugged. I've got to take a selfie to capture this and then post it online to share it with my friends.
- Rob: Exactly, so in that spirit, we came up with #1wknotech or One Week No Tech, a thought experiment in which we asked participants to *imagine* (emphasis here) giving up technology for one whole week and then to live tweet every moment of that experience.
- Mark: Yes, so students were pretty freaked out when we first proposed it, but then, they mellowed out when they realized that it meant they got to use their mobile devices even more.
- Rob: The goal wasn't really to make them more technology obsessed but to play out the paradox, the simultaneous and opposing pulls away from this technology that is doing damage to our lives and yet constantly back toward the world of friends and likes and online social approval.
- Mark: Some of our favorite pieces were the memes we had students create. In one, a student of mine stands staring down at a deodorant stick laying flat in her hand, a poor replacement for her smartphone.
- Rob: I think this netprov taught us the power of a good hashtag and how light a netprov could be. Basically, the whole premise is in the hashtag—the irony of a week without technology that has a hashtag for reporting back.
- Mark: Also, it was an easily repeatable netprov, and one that students enjoyed. Students expanded the netprov by interpreting “technology” in different ways. While some gave up digital technology, others gave up utensils, shoes, et cetera.
- Rob: Yes, it was a terrific example of students helping us explore an idea.

I Work for the Web (2015)

- Mark: Some of our projects emerge out of our daily goofing around on social media.
- Rob: Actually, most of our project emerge that way.
- Mark: Good point.
- Rob: So, one day, I saw Mark posting strange—well, stranger than usual—things on Facebook, claiming he was clocking in for his job working for Facebook, and his job was to post and Like things. He'd address his boss as Zuck, meaning Facebook-founder Mark Zuckerberg.
- Mark: I Liked my job. A LOT!

Rob: That little act laid bare the whole playbor economy and reminded me of something serious: by posting content on Twitter and Facebook, we were working as unpaid content providers for them.

Mark: And from that little seedling grew I Work for the Web, which begins as the misguided viral marketing campaign of a fictional media telecom giant, Rockehearst Omnipresent Bundlers (R.O.B.), who own and therefore control the internet. In its poorly conceived marketing campaign, the company attempts to get folks to imagine how great it would be if their job WAS Liking and posting on the internet.

Rob: Only the campaign backfired because it reminds many web users that they are indeed already working for the internet for free. So, some internet workers decide to protest.

Mark: In response to the foolhardy corporate campaign, a union movement is born, called the International Web and Facetwit Workers—which fortunately also spells out IWWFW—helping us keep to just one hashtag. We encouraged the participants to choose a side or to flip flop.

Rob: During I Work for the Web, we also introduced Nighthawks, named for the Ed Hopper painting, a fictional cafe/bar where the workers of the web could gather to drink, complain, and try to unionize—at least till Andrew Rockehearst sent in the Pinkertons—or rather, the Pingertons. In fact, the opening prompt for I Work for the Web was What Happened at Night Hawks? The conflicting accounts started us off.

Mark: That netprov was an example of one that had easy one-time fun—

Rob: Yes, remember the web waffler? The account from one of your students who served up waffles in the form of ## to anyone who wanted them?

Mark Very tasty. Or someone could play in “story mode,” we could call it, participating in the overarching story arc as the struggle to unionize grew to a crucial make-or-break vote for or against the union cast, of course, with Like thumbs up or down!

Rob: Oh, but remember, the vote was preceded by a hilarious walkout, people taking pictures of their fingers walking away from their keyboards.

All-Time High (2015)

Rob: Now All-Time High was different for lots of reasons, first because it was primarily driven by performance poets Claire Donato and Jeff T. Johnson.

Mark: Performance poets. I like that. They are also the wit and wiles behind Special America.

Rob: They had the idea that it would be it would be awesome to imagine going back to high school—what a nightmare, rt?—and to go back with everyone.

Mark: Everyone who has ever lived!

Rob: What if everyone was back in high school, including you?

Mark: Wait, do I *have* to go back to high school to play this?

Rob: Yes, Mark. See, people have such visceral feelings about high school, and this netprov gave people a chance to relive and re-explore old wounds.

Mark: At the same time, bringing back the dead allowed for some historical remixing. Sappho, the moody fragmented poet, interacting with Napoleon, the perpetually frustrated teenage tyrant with the—what would you call it?

Rob: Napoleon complex?

Mark: *Exactement!* This netprov featured a four-week Twitter narrative, punctuated by four big synchronous live events.

Rob: They were iconic high school and high school movie moments: The Big Game, The Big Test, The Big Dance, and Graduation. The live events gave a chance to do some synchronous play. But we were in for bigger surprises.

Mark: Yes, it was during this netprov that players changed their characters dramatically. One Twitter account kept cycling through characters based on roles the actor Johnny Depp had played. Another drug dealer, actually played by the same featured player, Mike Russo, also underwent a series of transformations, changing the display name and icon as the character evolved over time.

Rob: Yes, and Claire followed suit with her characters. That opened up Twitter again for us because it showed yet another way of using Twitter. One account could transform into different characters or different versions of the same character by changing handles or profile pictures. You know, that example demonstrates the way netprovs do not just use existing platforms, like the cuckoo bird laying eggs in other birds' nests, but transform them, find untapped affordances, like

Mark: The cuckoo bird egg rolling into the side of the nest and discovering a cuckoo-bird-egg shaped pocket.

Rob: Right.

Mark: Really?

Rob: I think so. Yes, netprov players don't merely adhere to and play off existing social conventions of networked platforms—conventions that have existed for all of two seconds in the grand scheme of things. Beyond crowdpleasing and fanserving, engaging the masses or pleasing the elites, a netprov-er surfs the waves of whimsy. So why not play?