DIKULT 350—Mastergradsoppgåve i digital kultur

Networked Improv Narrative (Netprov) and the Story of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

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0_Abstract

Netprov (networked improv narrative) is an emerging art form that creates written stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time. What optimum characteristics could give netprov projects—playful as they are—the depth of the great novels of the past? This question is explored through research and through a practical project, an original netprov—*Grace, Wit & Charm* —created, performed and documented in May of 2011 by the author for this thesis. Part 1 first defines netprov and lists its characteristics. Then it examines, historically and critically, the five tributary fields of netprov: 1) networked games (particularly Alternate Reality Games), 2) theater (particularly improvisation), 3) mass media (including notions of transmedia and phenomenon of fan fiction), 4) literature (particularly the fictionalization of vernacular forms used for telling truth), and 5) the Internet, social media and personal media (where the fictionalization of vernacular forms is pervasive). Best practices are drawn from each field. Netprov is understood as creative game based on the progression: mimicry, parody, satire. Part 2 examines *Grace, Wit & Charm*'s form, process and fictional subject matter and evaluates the May 2011 collaborative performance using the characteristics and best practices from Part One as a rubric. *Grace, Wit & Charm* concerns a fictional company that improves its clients' online self-presentation, providing GraceTM for clumsy avatars, WitTM for the humorless, and CharmTM for the romantically impaired. Artistic depth for netprov can be achieved by using self-aware literary strategies—often lacking in netprov-like projects originating in other fields—that promote laughter, insight and empathy.

Netprov (improvisert fortelling i nettverket) er en ny kunstform som gir skrevne fortellinger som er kollaborative, på nettet, og improviserte i sanntid. Hvilke karakteristikker vil kunne gi netprov-prosjekter - lekne som de er - dybden til fortidens store romaner? Dette spørsmålet er utforsket i oppgaven gjennom forskning og gjennom et praktisk prosjekt, en original netprov - Grace, Wit & Charm - skapt, framført og dokumentert i mai 2011 av denne masteroppgavens forfatter. Del 1 av oppgaven

bebgynner med å definere netprov og liste opp dens karakteristikker. Så framsettes en historisk og kritisk utforsking av de fem opphavsfeltene til netprov: 1) spill i nettverk (særlig Alternative Reality Games), 2) teater (særlig improvisasjon), 3) massemedia (deriblant konsepter som transmedia og fenomenet fan fiction), 4) litteratur (særlig fiksjonaliseringen av hverdagsformer som vanligvis brukes for å fortelle sannheten), og 5) internettet, sosiale medier og personlige medier (hvor fiksjonaliseringen av hverdagsformer er gjennomgripende). "Best practices" er trukket ut av hvert felt. Netprov forstås som et kreativt spill basert på progresjonen fra etterligning gjennom parodi til satire. Del 2 utforsker Grace, Wit & Charm's form, prosess og fiksjonelle tema og evaluerer den kollaborative framføringen i mai 2011 ved å anvende karakteristikkene og "best practices" fra del 1 som en rubrikk. Grace, Wit & Charm handler om et fiksjonelt selskap som forbedrer sine klienters selvpresentasjon på nettet ved å tilby GraceTM for klumsete avatarer, WitTM for de humørløse og CharmTM for de med romantiske utfordringer. Kunstnerisk dybde for netprov kan oppnås ved å bruke selv-bevisste litterære strategier - som ofte mangler i netprov-lignende prosjekter i andre felt - som fremmer latter, innsikt og empati.

1_Introduction

Sat May 14 07:56:15:

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

Sat May 14 13:00:

@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

Sat May 14 13:04:

@GWandC @Sonny1SoBlue Not "Strangers" reading yr Tweets. "Potential Cugstomers!" Legal in most states. It will be fun! Corporate says so! #GWandC
(Wittig, et al. 2011)

This exchange among fictional characters in the social medium Twitter as part of a project called *Grace, Wit & Charm* is an example of a powerful new art form that is developing at the intersection of new technologies and traditional modes of culture. This new art form, which I call netprov, has the potential to combine the depth of literary narrative with the exuberant creativity of theatrical improv, remix culture and social media. It is an art form in which storytelling professionals and inventive amateurs combine their efforts through nested creative games in real time, and in which a memorable period of intense playfulness can produce insightful satire and ultimately, I believe, artworks of lasting value. Projects that demonstrate the potential of netprov are appearing on all sides in different forms.

First played in 2007, a web-based online game invites a global group of players from widely different backgrounds to write realistic, fictional forecasts of what they think

would happen in *A World Without Oil*. At first the players collaborate on visions of disaster; then they begin to collaborate on solutions. (Eklund 2007)

In March of 2011 a cobra escapes the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The story hits the media. Within hours, the escaped snake is tweeting taunts to its would-be capturers and writing: "I should take in a Broadway show. Anyone heard anything about this "Spiderman" musical?" Within days, the cobra has thousands of Twitter followers. (BronxZoosCobra 2011)

Performed in May of 2011 and again in October of 2011, *The LA Flood Project* invites participants to use Twitter, Google Maps, sound recordings and online videos to spend a week collaboratively imagining the effects of a devastating flood in Los Angeles. (Marino et al. 2011)

This thesis was born from my enthusiasm about the many hilarious, promising, fragmentary netprov projects I see and my desire, as an artist, to answer the following question: **what optimum characteristics could give netprov projects – collaborative and playful as they are—the appeal and depth to have the same cultural impact as the great novels of the past?**

In order to find an answer I have researched the following component questions:

1) How best to organize **the people**—the human roles and relationships of creative collaboration, audience access and audience participation?
2) How best to structure **the form**—the technical, graphic, rhetorical, temporal and procedural logistics of the artwork?
3) How best to plan **the fiction**—the characters, stories and subject matter?

My research has taken two forms: Part One, a historical and critical analysis of the characteristics and multidisciplinary roots of netprov, and Part Two, the creation and performance of a new netprov work, which addressed substantial subject matter and

tested a hypothetical combination of characteristics derived from the historical and critical work. This project was the May, 2011 two-week performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm* (links to *Grace, Wit & Charm* are provided in the Appendix*)*. This intertwining of creativity and critical thinking continues a process of creative-critical cross-fertilization that has always been a part of my literary work.

Part One, Inspirations for Netprov

Netprov is radically interdisciplinary. It develops at the intersection of networked games, theater, mass media, literature, Internet practices, social media and private media. In Part One I look at each of these fields in turn, cataloging the ideas about **the people, the form and the fiction** of netprov that come from each. I look closely at ideas as diverse as those of game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal, sociologist and critic Roger Callois, improvisational theater guru Del Close, and media studies expert Henry Jenkins. I investigate themes including ancient traditions and principles of creative collaboration, the progression from mimicry to parody to satire, technologically self-aware comedy, the emergence of "worlds" as a key narrative construct, and I look closely at the concepts of "play" and "game" to see where netprov stands.

Netprov is interdisciplinary, but my own background is in literature – principally electronic literature – as well as graphic design and art history. My point of view, basic terminology and key examples will be drawn from literature. I will use the terms "reader" and "reading" instead of, say, "user" and "playing." I could well have said I want netprov to live up to the quality of a great film or a great game, but I choose, somewhat arbitrarily, to hold it to the standard of a great novel.

The theoretical background of my literature-based vision is, essentially, a **social psychological actor-network theory**. I see individual humans as not having a single, stable self, but, rather, as being composed of subpersonalities (e.g. child, Tai Chi player, parent, grad student, professor) that are situationally activated. I find confirmation of the subjective experience of subpersonalities in the work of psychologically-based American

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Zen teacher Cheri Huber and I find confirmation of objective, scientific observation of subpersonalities in the work of neurologist and medical professor Dan Siegel M.D. who uses the new fMRI technology to watch different parts of the brain activate in separate subpersonality modes. Then I see individual humans' multiple subpersonalities forming contingent networks with others' subpersonalities as described by Bruno Latour as actor-network theory (e.g. professor and students in a classroom during class time). These contingent networks I see as forming according to certain social scripts and metanarratives as described by, among others, literary critic and sociologist Roger Callois and historian of science Anne Harrington (e.g. social conventions of play and seriousness, or relationships between doctor and patient). I am particularly interested in how these contingent networks are formed using technological mediation (e.g. a professor and students using Skype, or an international work group writing meeting in *Second Life*). I see strong parallels between the microcosm of subpersonality dynamics and psychological scripts within the individual and the macrocosm of cultural metanarratives and social scripts in the greater world. At both levels, even in supposedly serious, real-life situations, playfulness, two-facedness and fictionizing abound. I have written at length about the interplay of fictional "selves" in a networked context and their use in making literature in my 1994 book *Invisible Rendezvous: Connection and Collaboration in the New Landscape of Electronic* Writing (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994). I will not revisit this background material in this thesis. My theoretical focus here is on two issues.

First, I am looking closely at the difference between fiction that takes place in forms already set aside for fictionizing (e.g. sit com, novel) and fiction that takes place by falsifying vernacular forms generally used for truth-telling (e.g. "fake" blogs, "fake" corporate web pages, "fake" social media).

Second, I am drawing a parallel between the sudden, disruptive and healing psychological process of insight within an individual and the sudden, disruptive and healing process of satire in society. To put it another way: I have chosen to study laughter. I am determined to understand why my critical and creative tastes are drawn to

literature that pretends not to be literature, that mimics and mocks everyday forms of communication, calls attention to its own materiality, reveals truth through parody, and is willing to break every formal and social rule in search of a laugh. I am determined to understand why I love netprov and why I think it is important.

Part One ends with the generic set of characteristics of netprov I used as a working hypothesis for the creation of the real project, *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

Part Two, A Practical Project: *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Part Two begins with the specific plan for *Grace, Wit & Charm* that came out of the generic characteristics elaborated in Part One.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please keep your cell phones turned ON throughout the performance." With these words an audience that was both in a theater and watching via streaming video on their computers in May of 2011 was invited to enter the imaginary world of a fictional company devoted to assisting netizens in improving their online self-presentation. The live performances were just a part of a two-week-long netprov fiction in which readers could follow in multiple media and in which they could participate in multiple ways.

Figure: Top of the home page of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

The basic fictional conceit of *Grace, Wit & Charm* is best summed up in its own, hyperbolic, marketing language:

In just two weeks, you'll get a chance to peek behind the curtain of the underground 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 gracewitandcharm.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™, for a smooth-moving avatar**,** 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™, designed for those with no sense of humor, allows the "online you" to deflect attention from your foibles while deftly landing a zinger!

And Charm™, for the romantically impaired, . . . 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.

"How do I know it will work for me?"

Just listen to Shana M. of Tampa: "I was scoring negatives on personality tests, but now this sparkly kraken avatar swims alongside me everywhere and introduces me to all its cool friends! Even in Call of Duty Black Ops!"

"But how does Grace, Wit & Charm™ work the magic?"

That's exactly what you'll see during our Open House, May 14th - 29th at gracewitandcharm.com, and on Twitter @GWaC.

(And if you're the clueful one in your crowd, come and see if a career in character enhancement might be for you!)

What's the use of going virtual if you're just the same old you?

You need Grace, Wit & Charm™! (Wittig 2011)

I give a detailed account of *Grace, Wit & Charm*, starting with a technical and procedural description – who, what, when, where and how.

I will follow this with an examination of the "why" of *Grace, Wit & Charm*: the subject matter of the piece.

Figure: Rob Wittig and writer/actors during the 2nd *Grace, Wit & Charm* live show, May 24th 2011

The Heart and Soul (or, rather, Mind and Body) of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Yes, netprov projects can be silly, but can netprov deal with serious issues in a sophisticated way? Underlying the satire of *Grace, Wit & Charm* was a fundamental curiosity and delight at the conundrum of the physicality of our networked interactions – our forgotten bodies sitting at the screen and keyboard. In the next chapter I discuss how I wanted to show the irony of real, live people prancing around a motion-capture grid in order to better activate on-screen avatars. I wanted to meditate on my fictional, hard-working team of "character enhancement agents" spending long hours helping clients upgrade their online selves at the expense of the team's own personal lives. I wanted to portray moments such as one of my characters acting out a sword fight on behalf of a client while text messaging her son on her own smart phone. I wanted to portray my characters' own long-distance love troubles as they solved clients' long-distance love troubles. I wanted to offer ways to think about labor and the workplace as work becomes more virtual.

Finally, in a chapter called "Results of the 2011 Debut performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm*," I will draw conclusions and look ahead to possibilities for future netprov projects.

Figure: "Character enhancement agents" solve client problems Tweeted by reader/participants during the 2nd live performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm* May 24, 2011

2_Definition and Characteristics of Netprov

Initial Definition of Netprov

Netprov = 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 usually 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.

I will return to the elements of this description one by one at the end of my historical/critical survey and have seen the origins and traditions that come with each of these characteristics

I use the world "improv" instead of "improvisation" because "improv" has a particular cultural legacy that I will show comes from the theater field.

The Taxonomy Puzzle

The definition above is, I believe, a solid, functional model that will get us through the next few years as the art form of netprov is taking shape. It contains a dilemma, however, that is instructive.

When I call netprov "networked improv narrative" I am fully aware that, in 2011, I could just as well call it "networked improv literature" or "theater" or "game." In fact, when talking about netprov informally I purposely vary among those three terms depending on the background and demographic description of my interlocutor. With people from a literary background I call it "literature." People with theater backgrounds hear "theater." To gamers, and younger people in general, I will describe it as a "game."

This conversational opportunism reveals something important. My research has shown me that netprov exists at the intersection of five different fields: games, theater, mass media, literature, and Internet, personal and social media.
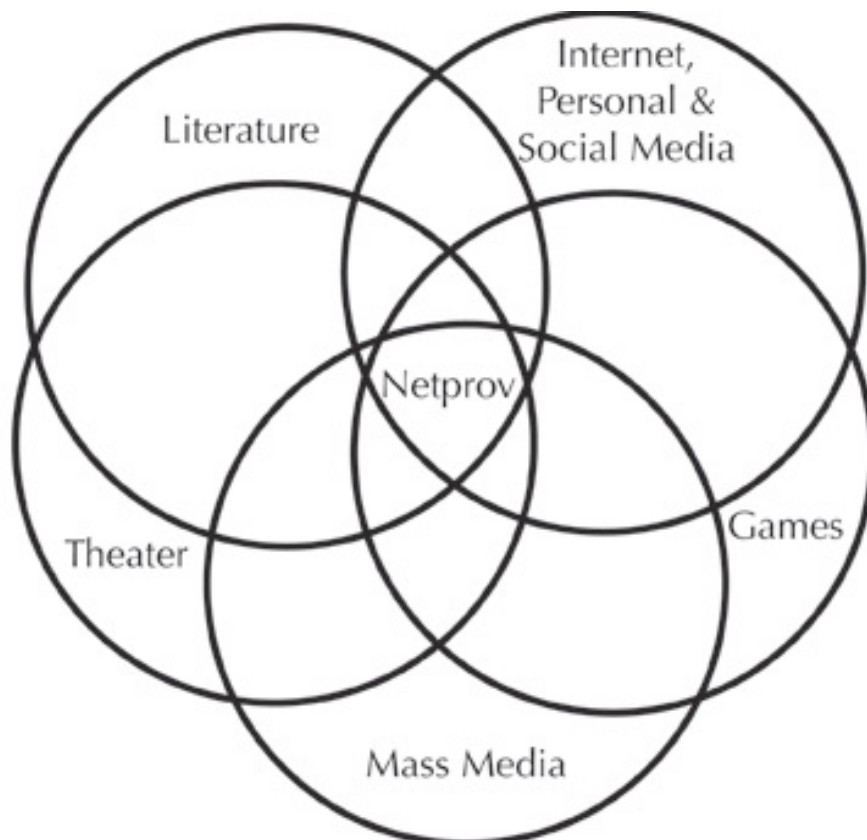

Figure: The tributary cultural fields of netprov

Netprov is not in the mainstream of any of its five tributary cultural fields. For example, netprov is *not*, in literary terms: prose fiction crafted over a long period of time by a single author, edited, printed and distributed in book form. Netprov is *not*, in theater terms: a written script, memorized, rehearsed and performed in repeated shows of 2-3 hours. The roots of netprov, as I will show, are to be found in marginal, emergent and sometimes forgotten practices.

What World are You From? Backgrounds of Netprov Practitioners

Each netprov practitioner and each potential audience member for netprov has an individual background that shapes her thinking. One can think of creative fields containing "permission" to do certain kinds of work. Collaboration, for example, is a *sine qua non* of the theater tradition, whereas collaboration in literature is by and large an oddity and is considered to be at the margins of traditional practice. 20-something Twitterers needed no explanation about how to participate in the social media aspects of *Grace, Wit & Charm*, whereas some 50-somethings from literary backgrounds and without familiarity with online gaming or social media never managed to get their minds around even the fundamental concepts of the project despite their most sincere efforts.

When it comes to evaluating netprov-like projects, the first question the critic needs to ask of the creator is: what world are you from? This provenance carries with it from the different fields a pool of examples and creative permissions that inform the projects and their fictions.

When it comes to writing about netprov—both critical writing for an academic audience and promotional writing for a potential participant audience – the writer must be strategic in referencing fields with which the audience can relate.

It is reassuring to see that I am not alone in puzzling over the taxonomy of netprov. It falls, quite persistently, evenly between theater, literature and game. From her

performance studies background, Antoinette LaFarge, writing on creative experiments on online MUDS and MOOS in 1995, says:

> My feeling is that such alternative names (hypertext/fiction/narrative) tend to underline the verbal and textual nature of online theater, with a nod to its real-time, multi-participant aspect (live/jazz/consensual). There is no question that this is a world now dominated by writerly conventions: in order to participate, one uses a keyboard to type descriptions, dialogue and commands. 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 the enactment of the text, not the text in and of itself. (LaFarge 1995)

Note LaFarge's use of the concept of a "world." I will return to the rich concept of fictional and performative worlds many times in this work.

Since netprov is so thoroughly interdisciplinary, I have adopted in this paper a rhetorical strategy cobbled together from critical structures from the different fields. Throughout I have been guided by the search for commonalities among these overlapping practices, and I have allowed myself to organize my thinking according to whose enjoyment is paramount.

Is netprov literature, theater or game? Is it a mass media, or an internet practice? Theater is organized around the audience's enjoyment. Games are organized around the players' enjoyment. Literature is organized around the readers' enjoyment. One of these principles may eventually rise above the others as netprov evolves, but for the time being I feel it is important to continue to claim quintuple citizenship for netprov. I believe in enjoyment for all. In short, the answer is: yes.

3_Networked Game Inspirations for Netprov

> Before you play Mornington Crescent it is assumed that because it was Thursday
> yesterday you will know that the short rules only apply and from the 2nd turn in
> reverse order during September. Please also remember rule 7b: All Egyptian
> moves are disallowed except crossovers and double takes.
>
> Please avoid all surface lines that back onto Mrs Trellis's home between 7pm and
> 7am on a Friday.(Anonymous 2011b) (transcribed Friday September 30, 2011)

For years, when someone asks me what my favorite game is, I have replied *Mornington Crescent*.

Since 1978 *Mornington Crescent* has been featured on the long-running BBC comedy panel show *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue.* The ostensible rules are simple: 1) players name a London street or subway station in turn; 2) the first player to arrive at Mornington Crescent is the winner. However, as soon as gameplay begins, every game invariably becomes mired in erudite arguments over the rules. Each player knowingly cites obscure sub-rules, foreign strategies, long-forgotten gambits. In fact, *Mornington Crescent* is an elaborate in-joke, a satire of pompous quibbling over rules in games and sports. Even the game's history invites debate. According to the Wikipedia account the real-life history of the game appears to begin with precursor games in the late 1960s. Within the game itself, histories and counter histories abound, with perhaps the most authoritative being related by the show's late chairman "Humph" (Humphrey Lyttleton, co-author of *The Little Book of Mornington Crescent*) (Brooke-Taylor et al. 2001) who spoke of such things as the Tudor Court Rules from the time of Henry VIII, when the subway system was smaller, and by which Shakespeare himself played the Mornington Crescent.

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The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter comes from just one of a plethora of independently operated websites, usually anonymous, that each, of course, earnestly provide conflicting rules. One of these sites, titled like so many others *The Game of Mornington Crescent* (Anonymous 2011a) presents written transcripts of games. The following beginning of a game titled "221B Baker Street" (Sherlock Holmes's fictional address in London) begins with the pseudonymous Marquis playing West Ham.

- **The Marquis: West Ham**
- **Dan: Hammersmith**. Would anyone object to the winning station being set to Baker Street for this game?
- **PaulWay: Covent Garden** [Dan] I don't see why we can't convert it into a game of Baker Street... BTW, not even close. Much later.
- **Dan:** Made and seconded, so without any objection the motion passes. *(Whap)* Target station set. Oh yes, a move. Umm. Damn. **Pass**.
- **The Marquis: West Ham**, with Sprick.
- **PaulWay:** Turning the Sprick latitudinal with **Hammersmith** played face-downward. (http://parslow.com/mornington/move.pl?2) (Anonymous "The Game of Mornington Crescent")

Why is Mornington Crescent my favorite game? Because it *is* a game, only not the kind of game it pretends to be. It is a creative game that performs a satire of over-earnest strategy games. It is the kind of play, the kind of game, that is at the heart of netprov.

What Kind of Game is Netprov?

Netprov clearly shares major attributes to a playful world of activities their creators refer to as "games:" writing games, theater games, role-playing games. I come from a literary background, and in my thinking over the years about netprov I have tended to give literary games, and literary precedents of all kinds, pride of place. As my research proceeded it became clear to me that theater precedents are at least equally important as the literary ones. But the big surprise for me was to discover that the existing projects that

most closely resemble netprov come not from the literary or the theater fields, but from the field of networked games—in particular, a kind of game called an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) as championed by game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal. In the ARGs that McGonigal describes there are many clues about how to organize the roles and relationships of the people for netprov, how to structure the form of projects as well some clues about the ambition and seriousness of the fiction and content such projects can support.

Therefore I am going to begin my survey of inspirations and precedents with the game field, and I am going to adopt certain critical rubrics that McGonigal and others apply to games and continue to use them as I look at proto-netprov works in other fields.

Leading with games also makes sense because it is in this world that the clearest discussions have taken place about a crucial definition for this thesis: what do I mean by the terms "play" and "game?" What kind of game is netprov? Identifying what kind of game netprov is can help make better netprov.

Jane McGonigal's 2011 book *Reality is Broken, Why Games Make us Better and How They Can Change the World* (McGonigal 2011) is her enthusiastic analysis and manifesto for a new and better future for networked games and the society she feels games can better serve.

McGonigal begins with an accounting of the huge numbers of person-hours currently devoted to online gaming, and projections about how that will increase. But she refuses to either decry these facts out-of-hand or to lament them with stereotypical accusations of gamers using games as mere juvenile escapism. She knows better than that: her recent demographics show that most gamers are adults and many are women. This is what is different about McGonigal's approach and attitude: she understands games and she likes games. She is respected and powerful within the game-creating community, and she is not shy about telling readers about her triumphant speeches to key gaming conferences about the ideas she presents to the general public in *Reality is Broken*.

Essentially McGonigal agrees that gamers do escape from reality into games, but she reverses the usual value structure and turns the blame squarely onto reality. Why do gamers spend so much time in game worlds? Because, she contends, their quality of life in terms of satisfying work and strong social connections is far better in games than in their real lives. Gamers escape from reality, says McGonigal, because reality is broken.

Jane McGonigal's Big Idea

To explain the bewitching attraction of gaming, McGonigal lists four major categories of what she calls "intrinsic rewards:" satisfying work, the experience (or at least the hope) of success, social connection, and meaning. She defines meaning as "the chance to be a part of something larger than ourselves. We want to feel curiosity, awe, and wonder about things that unfold on epic scales." (McGonigal 2011)

So, McGonigal states, "When we realize that this reorientation toward intrinsic reward is what's really behind the 3 billion hours a week we spend gaming globally, the mass exodus to game worlds is neither surprising nor particularly alarming." (McGonigal 2011)

But McGonigal has an agenda. After this analysis, she asks: "Why would we want to waste the power of games on escapist entertainment? Why would we want to waste the power of games by trying to squelch the phenomenon altogether?" (McGonigal 2011) She answers with a third alternative, her own big idea:

> "What if we decided to use everything we know about game design to fix what's wrong with reality? What if we started to live our lives like gamers, lead our real businesses and communities like game designers, and think about solving real-world problems like computer and video game theorists?" (McGonigal 2011)

In practical terms McGonigal's solution to the potential waste of the power of games lies along the path of Alternate Reality Games – the very ARGs that bear such a strong

formal resemblance to the nascent art form I'm calling netprov. Most of the rest of *Reality is Broken* is a set of encouragements and recipes for the kinds of ARGs McGonigal wants to see. Even though the book has a superficial style that is somewhere between an academic research essay and a sober book of futurology for businessfolk, lurking just beneath the surface is a passionate, speculative and partisan manifesto. Although she talks about precursor and parallel projects, most of the key examples in the book were co-created by McGonigal herself. Coming from a performance studies background McGonigal's vision is substantially different from most of those in the game industry in which she plays. The book is fundamentally about McGonigal's personal vision. McGonigal sees a new kind of game ahead. She discusses some promising examples, but no existing game is quite what she imagines they can be. The big payoff is yet to come. The book is intended to light a fire in the game industry, to encourage the world-saving ARGs she is convinced can come into being.

One of the central ideas of this thesis is that I am convinced by McGonigal's arguments and excited by McGonigal's enthusiastic vision, but I feel her projects are missing some potential power and depth in the form of ideas that come from other fields such as literature, theater, mass media and everyday non-game digital culture practices. McGonigal's ARGs have broadened my view of electronic literature to encompass the field of games; I want to encourage McGonigal and her collaborators to broaden their view of ARGs to include electronic literature.

The Obstacle of "Unnecessary Obstacles"

Given my enthusiasm for the kinds of projects McGonigal admires and creates herself, I went first to her book for a working definition of "game" that could be useful for netprov. These are McGonigal's four defining traits of a game: "When you strip away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: a *goal, rules,* a *feedback system*, and *voluntary participation*." (McGonigal 2011)

This four-part test does not map well onto netprov at first glance. Even more problematic is McGonigal's own favorite definition of games. She writes: "Bernard Suits, the late,

great philosopher, sums it all up in what I consider the single most convincing and useful definition of a game ever devised: 'Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.'" (McGonigal 2011)

Try as I might, I fail to find the *obstacle* in creative games such as netprov. One could contend that 'lack of a story' is an obstacle once one has resolved to spend time storytelling, but that seems to be an obstacle situated outside the game space, rather than within it, where Suits's obstacles are. All games could be seen as a response to some kind of "lack of gameness" in the world. There does seem to be a universal urge to play games just as there does to create fictions. But within the game space, creative games are pro-active rather than reactive; they may need inspirations but they do not need obstacles. Suits's definition, and McGonigal's adherence to it, are stumbling blocks for me in my attempt to define the type of game netprov is. Since McGonigal's definition of games doesn't quite fit netprov, I propose to rewind the history of theory about the subject and locate a definition with a more comfortable fit.

A Definition of Play

Johan Huizinga in his 1938 *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* included in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology,* summed up the formal characteristics of play:

> … we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Salen and Zimmerman 2006)

But does all play necessarily involve Huizinga's "fixed rules?" Netprov is playful but has

no explicitly written rules. Roger Callois expanded and refined Huizinga's ideas in his 1958 *Man, Play and Games.* Callois writes:

> Many games do not imply rules. No fixed or rigid rules exist for playing with dolls, for playing soldiers, cops and robbers, horses. Locomotives and airplanes – games, in general, which presuppose free improvisation, and the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting as if one were someone or something else, a machine for example. Despite the assertion's paradoxical character, I will state that in this instance the fiction, the sentiment of as if, replaces and performs the same function as do rules. (Salen and Zimmerman 2006)

This convenient redefinition of "rules" as the "fiction" provides me with a sly way of falling within McGonigal's and Suits's definition. Callois goes on to write "Rules themselves create fictions. . . . That is why chess, prisoner's base, polo, and baccara are played *for real*. *As if* is not necessary." (Salen and Zimmerman 2006)

Callois extends this principle into two large categories of games. "Thus," he writes, "games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe." To demonstrate this distinction Callois uses the example of "children, in order to imitate adults, blindly manipulating real or imaginary chess pieces on an imaginary chessboard, and by pleasant example, playing at 'playing chess.' " (Salen and Zimmerman 2006)

In Callois's categorization, netprov finds itself comfortably in the make-believe camp. Indeed, Callois's image of children playing at playing chess is the exact structural model for Mornington Crescent. I differ with Callois's example, however. I see the game of playing at playing as more than a kind of inadequate and infantile gesture, but as something, as I will show, that can have great artistic and social power.

Callois goes on to supply what he finds lacking in Huizinga, a rigorous classification of games. Callois proposes four categories, Agôn (Competition), Alea (Chance), Mimicry (Simulation), and Ilinx (Vertigo).

Netprov again clearly fits into Callois's category of Mimicry games, in which "the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another." (Salen and Zimmerman 2006)

I disagree with Callois here in only one respect. The translated version in which "the subject makes believe or makes others believe" runs the risk of forming too black-and-white a distinction between truth and lie. In the usual performance situation, neither the game-playing "subject" or the "others" genuinely believe that the subject is another. Their minds contain both the truth and the lie simultaneously; they perform a "willing suspension of disbelief," in Coleridge's famous formulation. The encompassing of the truth and the lie is part of the pleasure. There is a constant negotiation/oscillation between reality and an imaginative alternate reality. Each informs and illuminates the other. Sometimes one is preferred, sometimes the other.

Specifically when it comes to rules and mimicry, Callois notes "With one exception, mimicry exhibits all the characteristics of play: liberty, convention, suspension of reality, and delimitation of space and time. However, the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules cannot be observed – rules for the dissimulation of reality and the substitution of a second reality. *Mimicry* is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell." (Salen and Zimmerman 2006) As the Church of the Subgenius, a fascinating collaboration I will discuss later, that performs an ongoing mimicry of a church, says so boldly in their proselytizing pamphlets: "We pull the wool over our own eyes." (Dobbs and SubGenius Foundation 1983)

So then, the first element of my working definition of what kind of game netprov is, would be to say that netprov's home territory is the terrain delimited by Callois as **mimicry**. Improvisation could also be called "incessant invention." The key dynamic, as Callois points out, is the fascination of the spectator by the actor; there seems to be an irreducible aspect of performance to it. I would extend Callois's mimicry by adding that in a collaborative game of mimicry the first spectator(s) are other players, so that there is a kind of mutual spectacle-making taking place that also can be seen by passive, non-player spectators.

But what of the Callois's agon, the competitive aspect of games? Aren't creative games in some ways competitive?

Creative Contests: Mimicry with an Agon Coating

What is the nature of the competition in poetry contests or other literary competitions? It is different from what the networked game industry means by "game." The chief difference is the lack of an objective goal. Everyone can see the net ripple as the soccer ball hits the cords, but is it so clear who "wins" a poetry contest?

The actual goals of a poetry contest such as the audience-voted Poetry Slams that take place at Chicago's Green Mill night club are complex. The poetry slam movement as originated at the Green Mill was an antidote to deadly-dull poetry readings. Arguably, the goal of most poets is to be a very good poet, to be "the best." But why not then simply determine the best poet and have a solo reading? The sticking point is the subjectivity and contradictory multiplicity of aesthetic judgment. There is, in fact, no accounting for taste, and there is no objective measure of aesthetic quality. Given this, the poets' goal at a Poetry Slam may be said to be validation of their talent. Despite the fact that they vote a single winner, the goal of the audience is actually to hear as many good poems as possible. The supposed "game" is designed to bring together poets and audience in such a way as to bring out each poet's best work and to provide the additional *frisson* of seeing how the poets react to time pressure, social pressure and the threat of social

embarrassment. A poetry slam, like Mornington Crescent, is a pseudo game, a satire of a game. A poetry slam is mimicry.

Literary games are a form of heightened conversation. Psychologists such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and others have studied patterns of informal creative contests such as joke-telling and "gross-out contests" (in which participants try to use words to create the most disgusting image and most disgusted reaction from others). Csikszentmihalyi cites studies that show there is usually a consensus among the groups involved in these informal creative contests about who has succeeded, who has failed, and who has ultimately won. The "rules of the game," although unarticulated, are understood by the members of the group. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991)

Theatrical improvisation contests, such as those that happen at Chicago's Improv Olympics, founded by Del Close, are, like the Green Mill poetry slams, an audience-voted pseudo game. To this they add the spectacle of verbal creations composed "on the spot." The act of written verbal composition such as playwriting is usually hidden. The Improv Olympics offer the thrill of seeing a form of writing happen right before your eyes, especially thrilling since so many people claim to find writing difficult for them to do.

 But the collaboration with the supposedly competing Improv Olympic "teams" is the actual point of the exercise, not the competition. In their textbook of improvisation, Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim "Howard" Johnson write: "One of the first principles taught to students at the Improv-Olympia is that agreement is much more interesting than conflict. This is done by placing the actors in situations which normally cause conflict on stage. However, they are instructed to make unusual choices, so that the expected conflict will not arise. … this exercise is not about conflict. It is actually about agreement, and what develops after agreement is reached. … It is the *relationship between the players* that makes the scene." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

Even Jane McGonigal in *Reality is Broken* talks about the collaboration within competition. "To compete against someone still requires coming together with them: to strive toward the same goal, to push each other to do better, and to participate wholeheartedly in seeing the competition through to completion." (McGonigal 2011)

And most interestingly for netprov, Jane McGonigal points to a non-competitive model as an important new movement in gaming. "For the past few years, cooperative, or *co-op*, play and *collaborative creation* systems" (she gives the example of networked games such as *Little Big Planet* and *Spore*) "have consistently remained the most celebrated trends in gaming." (McGonigal 2011)

Beyond its usefulness in the formulation of netprov, this collaboration within competition is an important life principle. Religious studies scholar Alan Watts writes of this collaboration within competition from the biggest of big-picture perspectives, a spiritual perspective. "... to be "viable," livable, or merely practical, life must be lived as a game . . . it must be lived in the spirit of play rather than work, and the conflicts which it involves must be carried on in the realization that no species, or party to a game, can survive without its natural antagonists, its beloved enemies, its indispensable opponents . . . for chivalry is the debonair spirit of the knight who "plays with his life" in the knowledge that even mortal combat is a game." (Watts 1966)

Netprov, then, is a collaborative game of mimicry that can enfold into its mimesis a mimicry of games. Netprov's players are players in the theatrical sense and not the game sense.

Netprov vs. McGonigal's Four Characteristics

So where does this leave my definition the game for netprov vis a vis Jane McGonigal's four characteristics of a game: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation?

Voluntary participation in netprov is the most clearly applicable of McGonigal's principles, and I take it as self-evident. But lurking behind the voluntary participation idea and associated with it from Huizinga through Callois and Suits is the idea that games are inconsequential – that no real-life harm can come to the loser of a game, even a mimicry game that mimes bloodshed. This sense of an activity being "just a game" is actually consequential for the art form of netprov because it can disinhibit writer/actors who would tend to be less relaxed, spontaneous and creative if they thought they were creating literature "for real."

The **feedback system** in netprov has to be understood as some version of the artist-audience relationship, even if two writer/actors/players making each other laugh constitutes the artist-audience relationship oscillating back and forth at high speed.

Rules, as we've seen, are a more difficult issue. Callois states that rules produce fictions. But does it work the other way around? Do fictions produce rules? As Lance Parkin discuss in his consideration of the fictional world of Dr. Who (Parkin 2009) point out, James Bond can stay the same age in the 1960s, 1980s and 2010s whereas it is clearly 'against the rules' for Sherlock Holmes to be alive at all in the1920s.

The kind of rules netprov involves are fluid, socially-negotiated rules, based on make believe. McGonigal describes how even mainstream online games are constructed to make their rules easy to learn and understand, they way humans learn social rules: "Traditionally, we have needed instructions in order to play a game. But now we're often invited to learn as we go. We explore the game space, and the computer code effectively constrains and guides us." (McGonigal 2011)

The rules of netprov and other creative games are what I would call **parliamentary rules**. All game rules are built to organize relatively unpredictable results but true agonistic game rules are focused on the goal of winning and the certifying of winner. Parliamentary rules exist to organize collaborative writing and do not specify a particular goal. They focus on preventing social abuses: and guarantee that everyone may be heard,

that time and attention cannot be monopolized, that decisions can be reached by fair and transparent voting. Parliamentary rules also can contain self-altering processes; constitutions contain procedures for amending the constitution. In this way parliamentary rules support incessant invention of mimicry without requiring winners and losers or a particular outcome of any kind. Del Close's rules for the Improv Olympic form called "the Harold" begin with "The first rule of the Harold is that there are no rules" (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993). I believe what Close was pointing at in his joking paradox is the powerful parliamentary ability to revise the rules on the fly.

The **goal** is the most problematic characteristic of all. What is the goal of an artwork? What is the "goal" of *Don Quixote*? (Whatever it is, netprov aspires to that same goal.) McGonigal, like other game theorists talks particularly about "clear" goals, and in a sense there are clear goals to certain types of mimicry. Satire usually seeks a laugh, just as a pun seeks a groan. But the goals of netprov must be seen through the elaborate critical/aesthetic traditions of literature and show business. I think it safe to say that the universality of the creative play of children and the creative play of artists in virtually all known societies suggests something like a universal urge or need for make-believe. Since so much time is devoted to it with no external reward, it is very safe to say that, in McGonigal's terms, there is an *intrinsic reward* to make-believe.

Networked Games and The Work of Play

How does this intrinsic pleasure of make-believe map onto Jane McGonigal's intrinsic rewards of **satisfying work, success, social connection, and meaning**? Again, as with her four characteristics, the first item on her list is the most dissonant. As before, let's work backwards.

Without falling into a black hole of disputed definitions, it is safe to say that a quest for **meaning** is part of the literary and theatrical heritage of netprov. **Social connection** is well-assured both through collaborative relationships and the traditional writer-audience

bond. **Success** with no objective markers as discussed above is, by definition, subjective but I think can be verified as much for netprov as for any other art form.

This leaves us with work, **satisfying work**. McGonigal writes: "Games make us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work. … In fact, as Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading psychologist of play, once said, 'The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression.'" (McGonigal 2011) In a statement that is as close as she gets to an out-and-out apologia for the game industry she insists: "That's exactly what the game industry is doing today. It's fulfilling our need for better hard work – and helping us choose for ourselves the right work at the right time." (McGonigal 2011)

No formula in Callois or elsewhere that I can find, however, associates the concept of work with the play of mimicry. Even being careful not to blindly accept the formulaic opposition of "work" as the opposite of "play" and allowing for the possibility of "fun work" or "playful work" doesn't remove the fundamental disharmony.

Perhaps a clue to a reconciliation can be found by examining how McGonigal further defines work in her assertion that "Satisfying work always *starts* with two things: **a clear goal** and **actionable next steps** toward achieving that goal." (McGonigal 2011) Here we see that there is a common element in the dissonant "goals" of McGonigal's four characteristics and the dissonant "satisfying work" of her intrinsic rewards. Both involve an externally posed obstacle and an externally verifiable goal which McGonigal elsewhere calls "feedback" and I will call "proof of success."

This brings us, at last, to the crucial distinction between the game of netprov and the games of McGonigal. McGonigal's games need external goals and external proof of success. The creative play of netprov organizes itself around self-created, self-modified goals and relies, like all arts, ultimately on self-recognition as proof of success. External proofs of success, such as compliments, audience numbers and other players using and developing a creator's ideas, are always appreciated by creators, but are not necessary to

creation. In fact, most avant-garde art of the last two centuries was created "on speculation" with little or no feedback.

The goals of creative play ultimately are self-created and self-judged. No amount of praise can convince the self-doubting artist of the value of her work, just as no amount of detraction can keep the self-confident artist from realizing her vision. This lack of external proof of success is what makes for both the often-discussed "risk taking" of the creative life and the "courage" it takes to do it. The play of mimicry, the play of creative collaboration must operate without objective external validation. The mutual recognition of this creative courage makes for a particularly strong social connection among creative collaborators. Theatrical improv guru Del Close's description of this bond is described in *Truth in Comedy, the Manual for Improvisation.*

> Del is fond of the 'group mind' concept that develops during improv when everything works, and the ability to wire human minds together to become 'Supermen.'
> 'We are releasing higher and greater powers of the human being,' he explains. . . . When improvisers are using seven or eight brains instead of just their own, they can do no wrong.'
> ... 'On stage, one has a complete picture of what is going on, and also a clear sense of all potential moves. They are almost laid out in time. The pattern-making mechanism is kicked on, and yet, one's intellect does not desert him,' explains Del.
> … 'Since everyone is on the same wavelength, each player sees what the other sees. It's an absolute thrill, a tremendous surge of confidence, energy, and joy. I've given up searching for happiness, now that I realize joy is very easily achieved.'" (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

Close's thrill is subtly, but importantly, different from McGonigal's "feedback" and the objective proof of success. It has much more in common with McGonigal's intrinsic

reward of social connection. It is the camaraderie and mutual admiration of taking risks side-by-side.

When we return to the issue of satisfying work we see that, for McGonigal, "work" shares with "goals" the characteristic of objective proof of success. If you lay brick upon brick to build a castle, you have a castle. Or if, as Scott Rettberg suggests in his article *Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft*, you kill a certain number of computer-simulated enemies, you have a career. The enormously popular *World of Warcraft*, according to Rettberg,

> … offers its players a capitalist fairytale in which anyone who works hard enough and strives enough can rise through society's ranks and acquire great wealth. Moreover, beyond simply representing capitalism as good, *World of Warcraft* serves as a tool to educate its players in a range of behaviors and skills specific to the situation of conducting business in an economy controlled by corporations. (Rettberg 2008)

McGonigal's apparent obliviousness to this real-life, political dimension of games is a weakness in her book. Does the fact that, in addition to her scholarship, she consults for large game companies and corporations such as McDonald's enter into this selective vision?

Again: why is Mornington Crescent my favorite game? Because it satirizes the very idea of the objective proof of success and, by implication, the concept of success itself.

What is the Obstacle? Netprov and Suits's Definition of Games

So, let's get back to Bernard Suits's definition: 'Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.'

What motivates mimicry games —collaborative creative games in McGonigal's terms—is not the overcoming of an obstacle, but the resolution of intolerable tension. Creative games tackle a necessary obstacle: the seemingly irreconcilable psychological and social conflicts that are inherent in social life. Like seismic tensions in the earth's crust, inner psychological tensions among sub-personalities with conflicting motivations as well as outer social tensions among members of social hierarchies both find rebalancing in the earthquake of laughter. The truth is told, energy is released and a workable balance is restored. One of core pieces of advice of the renowned Chicago theatrical improv company Second City is: "There is a wealth of humor available through status differences and the playing thereof. Realize it and play with it. The changes and shifts that are inherent are ripe for the taking." (Libera 2004) As I will show, this satirization of status and the *status quo* is a theme that runs deep and long in the theatrical improvisation tradition. The play of mimicry, parody and satire are necessary. An un-satirized world is unlivable.

Healing Necessary Relationships

I will show below that the social healing intent of 'artistic satire' is similar to McGonigal's goal for games of 'fixing a broken reality.' I believe that a reformulation of Suits's dictum that works for netprov is: *Netprov is the voluntary attempt to heal necessary relationships*. Games can share with netprov and the traditional arts of mimicry the paradoxical goal of being simultaneously inconsequential and consequential, being "just a game" while at the same time being deadly serious and having the power to change the course of history.

Game Inspirations for Netprov

Pre-Digital Games

The foundation of games of mimicry, as in Callois's own examples, is the informal, physical mimetic play of children. But another familiar physical game tradition, parlor games such as Charades, was also an influence on the motion-capture, avatar-

enhancement aspects of *Grace, Wit & Charm.* It is interesting to note that motion capture game consoles such as the Wii and Xbox Kinect are poised to continue this tradition and make networked parlor games possible.

In the 1960s and 1970s a so-called New Games movement was promoted by *Whole Earth Catalog's* Stewart Brand and others in the San Francisco Bay Area. The concept was to invent and play games that were participatory but not competitive, in a "Make Love, Not War" spirit. The movement is cited by Jane McGonigal as one of her pre-digital influences.

Historical re-enactment organizations have re-created historical battles for decades, and informal to formal versions of live action role-play (LARP) exist inside and outside of entertainment venues such as Renaissance Fairs. Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) such as the well-known Dungeons and Dragons are clearly a formal version of a collaborative creative game.

Digital Games

Much has been written already in the field of new media about the transition from tabletop RPGs to online single-player RPGs, also known as interactive fiction, to Multi-User Domains or Dungeons (MUDs) and MUD Object-Oriented (MOOs). With an increase in network access came the age of Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) and, most importantly for netprov, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing games (MMPORGs). MMPORGs create are worlds that allow greater and lesser amounts of open play, but fundamentally establish a fictional ground for participatory fictional improvising. Users with screen capture technology can use game avatars as actors and dub in new sound in a creative activity called Machinima. As MMO environments allow more free roaming without required gameplay they become like non-rule bound environments such as *Second Life*, and become more open to use as settings for user-created narratives.

Alternate Reality Games

Alternate Reality Games described, championed and often created by Jane McGonigal*, have more of the characteristics of netprov grouped together than any other non-netprov form.

McGonigal describes ARGs as ". . . the antiescapist game."

> ARGs are designed to make it easier to generate the four intrinsic rewards we crave – more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and more meaning – whenever we can't or don't want to be in a virtual environment. . . . In other words, ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it. ARG developers want us to participate as fully in our everyday lives as we do in our game lives. (McGonigal 2011)

Who creates ARGs? McGonigal says:

> Some ARGs are invented and playtested on a shoestring budget, whether by artists, researchers, indie game developers, or nonprofit organizations. They're developed for a few hundred or a few thousand players. Others are backed by multimillion-dollar investments, receive funding from major foundations, or are sponsored by Fortune 500 companies. These bigger games can attract tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even, in a few extremely successful cases, millions of players. (McGonigal 2011)

How do ARGs work? Let's look at a few examples from *Reality is Broken*. The ARG *Chore Wars* (Davis 2007) is a great place to start. With graphics straight out of a Tolkienesque 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, adopt fantasy avatars and the site will track who has earned the most points for cleaning vacuuming or vanquishing the dread toilet bowl. McGonigal

describes herself racing to complete point-laden cleaning tasks in her own household. *Chore Wars* is a very literal application of the ARG principle of making real life like a game, dressing housework in the garb of heroic adventure and counting on a real-life family game attitude and game banter for its effectiveness.

Richer and more inventively and ingeniously blended into real life is **Superbetter** (McGonigal 2010), a concept ARG developed by Jane McGonigal to aid her slow recovery from a bad concussion she suffered in the summer of 2009. Feeling depressed, disempowered and isolated by waiting weeks for small improvements, she (again, fairly literally) adopted a super-heroic fighting attitude and organized her 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. One of the most interesting aspects of this project is the implicit recognition of the power of adopting a fictional persona on the "player's" real life mood and health. Mimicry, this game says, can become reality.."

Two games inspired essentially by the desire to counteract the fear of flying are presented by McGonigal to show how ARGs can engage multiple players outside a family or group of friends. Ian Bogost's **Jetset** (Bogost 2009) 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 (Google Apps 2011) 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.

The ARGs discussed so far use the forms of point-competition games, puzzles and conventional game-style hero quests. *Top Secret Dance-Off* (McMonsef 2009), on the other hand, begins to show us how ARGs can harness the power of creativity games and video sharing technology by organizing an international dance competition among disguised dancers.

A Narrative ARG: World Without Oil

In McGonigal's catalog, where ARGs begin to take on many of the characteristics of netprov is in the game *World Without Oil* (Eklund 2007) Jane McGonigal was part of the creation of *World Without Oil*, which she calls a "forecasting game" in which 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. This is collaborative creative writing, pure and simple. 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.

Once the *World Without Oil* game was done, McGonigal and her teammates were faced with the same dilemma that I faced in thinking about *Grace, Wit & Charm*: is the live experience all-important, or could a valuable experience also be had by reading an archive. She writes "Today the entire simulation has been preserved in a sort of online time machine at Worldwithoutoil.org, where you can experience the game from day one all the way through day thirty-two. . . . there are also guidelines for playing the game yourself today . . ." (McGonigal 2011) Her solution, like mine is an answer of "yes" to all three experiences. The live game/performance is a valid experience, reading the archives is a valid experience, and others are encouraged to replay the game for themselves (or "produce the show again" to use terminology from the theater field).

A New Role: Participation Architect

Since *World Without Oil* was a collaborative creation game so like the netprov projects I produce, I researched it carefully for clues that could aid netprov. And I found a very important one in McGonigal's job title on the project. McGonigal writes:

I happily accepted Eklund's invitation to join the project team as the game's 'participation architect' – a fancy way of saying my job was to help make sure every single player found a way to contribute meaningfully to the collaborative effort. Of course, to start, we had to attract a community of players. I set our target at one thousand players . . . For six weeks before we launched, we spread the word online and at public events. We asked our friends and colleagues to blog about it. I announced the game in my keynote for the Serious Games Summit. . . .. ITVS reached out to educators and media creators across the country. There wasn't any other marketing plan or promotional budget for the game. It was simply an open, public invitation to simulate the future, and the game was free to play. (McGonigal 2011)

This new role with its ring of the engineering world, "participation architect," so unlike any traditional roles in literature or theater, was a revelation to me. In my netprov projects I myself have hitherto performed the tasks of the participation architect: publicizing the project, soliciting participation and welcoming participants. By my own estimation I have not done them particularly well. Why not? The literary world from which I come has been coasting for over a century on a publicity distribution model (publishers, bookstores, reviewers) which, although clearly crumbling, has inertia enough to lull writers into thinking that it is somehow unseemly and unnecessary to be aggressive and proactive about reaching their audience. Theater and traditional mass media (show business) although themselves morphing, are essentially in the same boat, having an established audience with established habits of looking to traditional entertainment calendars, advertising and reviews to connect with shows.

I realized with just those two words "participation architect" that if I wanted to reach a new audience with the new art form of netprov—and more than just an audience, people who would come ready to play and create—I couldn't coast on old publicity strategies. This realization came relatively late in the *Grace, Wit & Charm* project and I wasn't able

to take full advantage of it, but some version of a participation architect will be a part of every netprov project I do from now on.

Eliciting Creative Participation in Narrative ARGs

Two more ARG projects described by McGonigal are instructive for netprov. The first gives us a glimpse of the kind of global reach and participation levels possible with substantial funding. This is the corporate-sponsored narrative ARG: **The Lost Ring** (FindTheLostRing 2008). Its beginning is very much like the fictional frame of *Grace, Wit & Charm's* purported "open house." In February of 2008 amateur archeologist Eli Hunt begins a podcast series in which he recounts his potential discovery of a forgotten game from the ancient Greek Olympics. The only problem is that Eli Hunt is a hoax, a fictional character. Despite this fact, links to Hunt's podcast are found on the International Olympic Committee's web page. Why? Because the game Hunt's podcasts set in motion, *The Lost Ring*, is actually endorsed by the International Olympic Committee and is sponsored by McDonald's restaurants. Jane McGonigal was one of the game's creators. As the weeks went by the game organized players around the world into international teams to search for real-life clues physically hidden on different continents, and to piece together the rules of play of the lost game, in which a blindfolded runner navigates a human labyrinth by using audible cues, a game which turned out to bear a remarkable resemblance to the good old New Games of Stewart Brand and friends. Once the rules of the fictional ancient game had been established, teams formed around the world to actually play the game and actually compete for the best time, posting their results on YouTube. In this project, the fiction portion of the game is conceived, pre-planned and executed by a paid professional team who wrote the podcasts, hid the clues and managed the website. The creative participation of the audience took the form of puzzle-solving and competing in the support, "co-creating" a sport with all the sport's attendant styles, strategies and traditions.

Inner Circle and Outer Circle; Collaborators and Participants

When I read about *The Lost Ring* it confirmed a working hypothesis I had been developing in *Grace, Wit & Charm* and other, preceding, netprov and proto-netprov pieces. Projects can have an inner circle of creative collaborators who prepare the project in secret for its performance and who create and guide the core fiction. Then the projects can invite an outer circle of participants to come and play in ways that are supported by the core fiction, but are separate from it. In *The Lost Ring*, McGonigal and her team created the core characters, invented the game and planted the clues. *Lost Ring* participants solved puzzles, formed teams and played the game. In other words there can be creative control over the core fiction so that there is a planned, literary shape to it and so that participant vandalism can't ruin it. At the same time outer circle participants have complete creative freedom within their own realm of the project. For example, it's conceivable in *The Lost Ring* to have a "bad" participant team, a "grumpy" participant team, or even a participant team that disputes the rules and plays in alternative way *à la Mornington Crescent* without it wrecking the core fiction or the performances of other teams.

The second complex, creative-participation ARG in McGonigal's account is the six-week ***Ghosts of A Chance*** (Maccabee 2008) sponsored by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In it, fictional curators Daniel and Daisy are able to communicate with two ghosts haunting the Luce gallery, ghosts who insist that their stories be told in an art exhibit. The problem is that, since they are ghosts, they can't make the art. They need the public's help with that. A series of online missions walked participants through research activities, gallery visits, and the creation of art that was first shared on the web, then finally displayed for real in the gallery.

Ghosts of a Chance's frame narrative of ghosts who need help making art achieves what, to me, is one of the keys to good netprov: a compelling story that effortlessly and naturally encourages outer circle participation.

Practical Advice About Collaboration

One of the key sociological observations McGonigal makes is that, far from the stereotype of games as socially isolating, according to her data, one of their chief appeals is that they support the formation and maintenance of strong social connections. This happens particularly, she maintains, in games that require collaboration to meet goals. Therefore she carefully examines collaboration with a game designer's eye. She writes:

> Collaboration is a special way of working together. It requires three distinct kinds of concentrated effort: cooperating (acting purposefully toward a common goal), coordinating (synchronizing efforts and sharing resources), and cocreating (producing a novel outcome together). This third element, cocreation is what sets collaboration apart from other collective efforts: it is a fundamentally generative act. Collaboration isn't just about achieving a goal or joining forces; it's about creating something together that it would be impossible to create alone. (McGonigal 2011)

Here again in McGonigal's "generative act" we recognize Callois's "incessant invention." Her practical advice for collaboration involves five principles: common ground, shared concentration and synchronized engagement, mutual regard, collective commitment, and reciprocal rewards.

At first glance it might seem that McGonigal would have little to offer netprov in terms of collaboration compared to the deep and sophisticated wisdom of conventional theater and improv theater. But there is one element here that the theater field does not talk about so explicitly, the "reciprocal rewards." Del Close eloquently talks about the joys of collaboration, but McGonigal's close attention to feedback and objective proof of success actually is an idea that can benefit netprov. Part of what the new participation architect can do is take great care to try to assure that audience/participants get the best possible feedback about their creative input, helping them feel that their contributions are being seen and incorporated, in essence laughing at their jokes and giving them the same kind of reaction a live comedy troupe might get from each other and their audience.

McGonigal also supplies netprov theory with a name and model for projects that are collaborative and happen more-or-less in real time, but that do not demand players to be playing completely simultaneously. The written contributions to the *Grace, Wit & Charm* bulletin board on the website could be made at any time. They set in motion a sequence of replies, but they didn't necessitate real time work. McGonigal calls this a massively single-player game. She notes: "A massively single-player game like *Spore* suggests that epic contexts combined with collaborative production tools and sophisticated content-sharing platforms can create opportunities for what we might call **lightweight, asynchronous collaboration**. It's less immediately participatory, but it can still produce extreme-scale results." (McGonigal 2011)

To feel that something is happening in real time doesn't necessarily demand the immediate dialogic feedback of a telephone or Skype connection. In the age of text messaging, Twitter and Facebook, even intimate communication seems concurrent if replies come within minutes or hours, not seconds. Lightweight, asynchronous collaboration matches two efficiencies: asynchronous telecommunications tend to be much less expensive than dedicated "live" connections, and busy people can much more easily fit asynchronous communications into their lives than "live" communications. The concept of lightweight, asynchronous collaboration describes a number of the projects I will discuss later in the field of Internet, social media and personal media, projects such in which participants independently publish contributions on a particular topic.

What Netprov Can Learn From Games

When it comes to **people, the roles and relationships**, the game field is clearly expert and inviting, managing and keeping audience participation. McGonigal's role of participation architect is something netprov needs. ARG projects that have an inner circle who create the core fiction and invite an outer circle to play in a way supported by, but separate from the core fiction are a useful model. There are clearly ways to both explain participation to the audience, invite them to play and to give strong feedback that netprov

can model from the game industry. In fact in most games there is not really a place for an audience, which in this field would be called mere "lurkers." The principle of most networked games is play or go home, and this kind of attitude could improve participation in creative projects. Networked game designers also know a great deal about creating fictional worlds and creating loyalty (some would say addiction) to them.

As for the **form**, bringing awareness to the explicit and implied parliamentary rules for collaborative creation and studying rules as the game world does, can help netprov. The game field has an enormous amount to offer netprov in the way of sheer programming power and technological affordances. The social, cultural and economic ties between games and technologists is strong. Graphic world-making is incredibly sophisticated in the game field, as is the design of interfaces, characters and control systems. However most networked games are acutely agonistic and there are fewer examples of games designed to support open-ended creativity.

When it comes to the **fiction** the game world is relatively weak, from a literature and fine arts (art, theater, film) point of view. Game fictions tend not to avail themselves of the rich literary tradition. Here's where fine literature and fine arts can fill the gap for netprov. Game designers are clearly capable of building elaborate and self-consistent worlds with detailed fictional mythoi. Literature and fine arts can lend to these worlds: narrative strategies that investigate important psychological, social and historial issues, memorable characters who have depth, subtlety, quirks and vulnerabilities, line-by-line writing that is rich, accurate, surprising and insightful, and visual design that surpasses genre clichés.

4_Theater Inspirations for Netprov

Theater sources of netprov share with literary and game sources cultural fashions of the 1950s and 1960s, a period in which Dada and Surrealist ideas of art by chance operation and the improvisatory free association of automatic writing were entering the mainstream. This resulted in movements such as the Theater of the Absurd of Ionesco and Beckett, which drew not only from the Surrealism of the '20s and '30s but from an ancient theater tradition that had haunted the wings of legitimate theater for centuries: the Commedia Dell'Arte. Commedia Dell'Arte is a particularly exquisite Italian flowering, occurring from about 1500 to about 1750, of an unbroken tradition of popular comic performance that extends back into Classical Rome and Greece. It is the bawdy, acrobatic underbelly of European theater. Plots, tropes and character dynamics from the Commedia influenced Shakespeare, Moliere, Goldoni and others.

Commedia Dell'Arte has a fundamental formal difference from "high" theater. It is improvised, not memorized. Its plots were recorded in "scenarios," as the term went in Italian—simple plot outlines. Its characters were traditional, a constant cast of characters who always have costumes, body language, gestures, and voices which probably also go back to ancient times.

"It was simplistic, physical, witty in the way of folk wisdom" writes Beri Rolfe in *Commedia Dell'Arte: A Scene Study Book*. "Its sole motivating force was love: misers loved money; lovers loved each other . . . servants furthered the love interests of their masters while engaging in their own; the captain loved himself and the deference due him; and the doctor loved his pretensions. Love, lust, lucre, laughter." (Rolfe 1977)

The spectacular skill of the Commedia Dell'Arte performer is best described by one of the best, Gherardi, in this passage quoted from *The Italian comedy : the improvisation, scenarios, lives, attributes, portraits, and masks of the illustrious characters of the Commedia dell' Arte* by Pierre Louis Duchartre.

Listen to Harlequin himself, otherwise known as Gherardi, the gifted actor-author of the seventeenth century, who said: 'The Italian comedians learn nothing by heart; they need but to glance at the subject of a play a moment or two before going upon the stage. It is this very ability to play at a moment's notice which makes a good Italian actor so difficult to replace. . . . For a good Italian actor is a man of infinite resources and resourcefulness, a man who plays more from imagination than from memory; he matches his words and actions so perfectly with those of his colleague on the stage that he enters instantly into whatever acting and movements are required of him in such a manner as to give the impression that all that they do has been prearranged.' (Duchartre and Weaver 1966)

Here in this ancient art form we see the figure of the "actor-author" who features so strongly in my vision of netprov under the name writer/actor.

The *Camaraderie* of Commedia Dell'Arte

Important for netprov too, are the unwritten, but highly important rules that govern the creative collaboration. These unwritten rules become a kind of personality trait that differentiates the Commedia actor from other creators. Duchartre specifies: "Moreover, a good improvisator had to practise a kind of self-abnegation and refrain from indulging his own conceit or overplaying his part to the detriment of other *rôles*. The actors of the Italian troupes of necessity developed a spirit of *camaraderie* in their playing, and they achieved such understanding and mutual co-operation as were not found in the companies playing ordinary drama." (Duchartre and Weaver 1966)

This Commedia tradition of *camaraderie* harmonizes well with the magic spell of mimicry that is a bond between mimic and audience in Roger Callois's mimicry as well as the collaborative nature of Jane McGonigal's co-op games.

Breaking these rules of generosity and cooperation risk destroying the work. Duchartre writes: "Riccoboni, another actor-author, wrote in his *Histoire du théâtre italien* (1728): '… for a drawback of improvisation is that the success of even the best actor depends upon his partner in the dialogue. If he has to act with a colleague who fails to reply exactly at the right moment or who interrupts him in the wrong place, his own discourse falters and the liveliness of his wit is extinguished." (Duchartre and Weaver 1966)

Mimicry, Parody and Satire

The subject matter of the Commedia was satire, speaking truth to power, a kind of social recalibration and rebalancing in societies that were fiercely and often cruelly hierarchical. The vapid vanity of the elite, the cupidity of the clergy and the stupidity of the peasant are among the constant themes. No part of the social network is immune to being lampooned.

The Commedia allows me to connect a few dots that create an important formation in the theory of netprov. I contend that there is a progression from mimicry to parody to satire. We've seen how Callois places mimicry as one of only four types of games in the rich gaming lives of *homo sapiens*. And now the explosion of new discoveries in contemporary neuroscience is revealing the neurochemical infrastructure of mimicry: mirror neurons. A basic introduction to the concept of mirror neurons can be found in Daniel Goleman's *Social Intelligence, the Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships*. (Goleman 2006)

Mirror neurons, according to Goleman, are a particular kind of neuron which cause our bodies to instantly imitate body language and facial expressions observed in others – the "monkey see, monkey do" mechanism. Goleman explains:

> Because they [mirror neurons] are adjacent to motor neurons, their location means that the areas of the brain that initiate a movement to can readily begin to activate even as we watch someone else make that same movement. When we mentally rehearse an action—making a dry run of a talk we have to give, or envisioning the

fine points of our golf swing—the same neurons activate in the premotor cortex as if we had uttered those words or made that swing. Simulating an act is, in the brain, the same as performing it, except that the actual execution is somehow blocked. (Goleman 2006)

Humans evolved, implies Goleman, to use mimicry both to learn and to coordinate group activities for survival. One person ducks; everybody ducks.
"Social skill depends on mirror neurons," maintains Goleman.

For one thing, echoing what we observe in another person prepares us to make a speedy and fitting response. For another, the neurons respond to the mere hint of an intention to move, and they help us track what motivation may be in play. Sensing what other people intend—and why—offers invaluable social information, letting us keep a step ahead of whatever will happen next, like social chameleons. (Goleman 2006)

Mirror neurons are increasingly thought to be essential to the emotion of empathy. The model some researchers are constructing holds that we know what another person is feeling by first unconsciously imitating them – mimicry—then emotionally interpreting the neuromuscular disposition of our own bodies and projecting that emotion back out onto the other person. Other examples of subconscious mirror neuron activity include contagious yawns, contagious flinching and, important for this study, contagious laughter. When we watch elite athletes, these researchers suggest, our bodies subliminally participate in the achievement via mirror neurons.

Children's chameleon-like mimicry of adults, described by Callois, begins, then with this mirror neuron process. We all know the next steps. A child imitates another child. On the face of it this presents an natural impossibility: two of the same. The brain delights. In addition, the mimicry is imperfect, exaggerated, but contains in broad strokes the motion of the model. This very imperfection produces laughter. Parody is born.

The Oxford Dictionary Online defines *parody* as "A literary composition modeled on and imitating another work, esp. a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect." (OED Online. "parody, n.2") The same dictionary offers as a definition of *satire*: "The employment, in speaking or writing, of sarcasm, irony, ridicule, etc. in exposing, denouncing, deriding, or ridiculing vice, folly, indecorum, abuses, or evils of any kind." (OED Online. "satire, n.")

For my purposes I take parody to be the exaggeration of a characteristic style, and satire to have the additional mission of denouncing evils. So, we return to our mimetic child parodying another child only to see that he is now using his mimicry to imitate and exaggerate an adult, perhaps the bad temper of the head of the clan. Now we have satire.

The netprov I am most interested in is both parodic and satiric. In particular, it is parodic and satiric as opposed to Frederic Jameson's notion of postmodern pastiche which merely travesties and remixes with no critique. The netprov projects I study here are inherently critical—critical of both the content and form of contemporary communication; they are, in fact, *therapeutic*, aiming to reveal, correct and heal. We have met this corrective, therapeutic social impulse before, in the form of Jane McGonigal's ideals for Alternate Reality Games and my formulation of the game of netprov as *the voluntary attempt to heal necessary relationships.*

Speaking of the importance of maintaining a level of frustration in games, McGonigal quotes Ralph Koster: "He writes, 'Fun from games arises out of mastery. It arises out of comprehension. . . . With games, *learning* is the drug.' And that's why fun in games lasts only as long as we're not consistently successful." (McGonigal 2011) Although netprov as a creative game might quibble with the notion of necessary frustration, Koster's point about the importance of learning is exactly in line with this mimicry-parody-satire construct, for in satire also, insightful learning is the drug.

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Theater Games and North American Improv

Improv is a form of cabaret theater (meaning a theater with tables, servers and drinks rather than a theater with only rows of seats) in which the actors improvise, often starting with suggestions from the audience.

The origins of improv lie in mid-20th century avant-garde theater practices, and in didactic acting training games, as compiled by Viola Spolin in her *Improvisation for the Theater* (Spolin 1983), first published in 1963. Spolin's teacher Neva Boyd based her use of games on observation of social games among inner city immigrant children. Del Close was a writer/actor/director, inspired both by Spolin and the Commedia Dell'Arte, who had a hand in a succession of groundbreaking troupes, from the Compass Players of Chicago and St. Louis, San Francisco's The Committee, Chicago's Second City Theater, NBC television's *Saturday Night Live*, and who ultimately, with Charna Halpern founded Chicago's Improv Olympics. Halpern, Close and Johnson write of improv's origins: "As the purists will be quick to point out, improvisation is not necessarily funny (even when it's intentional, as plenty of actors who have "died" on-stage will attest to). The first improvisations performed by the Compass Players and other forerunners to Second City were not always intended to be humorous." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993) The serious motivation behind all the laughter, the fundamental aesthetic morality of Del Close's improv is summed up in his dictum: "*The truth is funny.* Honest discovery, observation and reaction is better than contrived invention." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

The Principle of "Yes, And"

As we saw in the theoretical discussion of games above, the key to Del Close and Charna Halpern's Improv Olympia nightclub shows was the principle that agreement is more interesting than conflict. As they formulated this idea, they knew very well that it was contradicting the conventional wisdom of story subscribed to by so many writers and theater people: that the key to story is conflict.

To train his actors in this counter-intuitive approach, Close's created *The Ad Game*, which mimicked an advertising agency brainstorming session. The iron-clad rule of the game was: "Every idea is accepted enthusiastically and remembered, each step is built off the previous idea. In order to properly brainwash the actors with this theory of acceptance, the director may want to force them to over-accept, screaming 'Yes!' 'Terrific idea!' 'Great!' and other praises of brilliance after each idea is stated. This over-acceptance – particularly of stupid ideas – only makes the game funnier." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

As this idea spread throughout the Chicago improv scene and beyond, it was boiled down into this terse formula, here cited from *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*: "Always agree: "Yes, and". (Libera 2004)

The Game According to Del Close

The term "game" had two meanings for Del Close. One meaning was the pedagogic games that had begun, in the teaching of Viola Spolin and others, as behind-the-scenes training for actors. These games have names such as the Ad Game (described above) and Invocation (described below). One might define Chicago-style improv performances, in fact, as the transportation of these behind-the-scenes training games onto the stage for public display. The second meaning of game is subtler, based on direct observation of everyday human interactions.

Dr. Eric Berne's bestselling 1964 pop psychology book *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (Berne 1964) may have influenced how Close and other improv founders thought about these everyday games. In the book, based on a school of psychology called transactional analysis, Berne describes and names psychological gambits such as "See What You Made Me Do," "I'm Only Trying to Help You" and "Let's You and Him Fight."

In Truth in Comedy Halpern, Close and Johnson write:

"Careful players will note that the structure of any good scene is usually a game, one that is discovered in the first three lines of dialog.

A game doesn't have to as specific and organized as some of the improv exercises explained throughout this book. Games are found within scenes. One example is one-upsmanship, where each player tries topping the other with every sentence (and of course, the opposite – continuing to lower one's own status – is equally valid)." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

These informal or semi-formal games based closely on unconscious social/rhetorical tropes embedded in everyday life are crucially important to netprov. The noticing and mimicry of these small structures, and their extrapolation into parody and satire, form a great deal of the substance of *Grace, Wit & Charm* and other netprov projects.

A Form for the Informal: The Harold

What can netprov learn from improv about the structuring of large projects? Del Close's most sophisticated and robust improv game was a long form, suitable for an evening's cabaret entertainment, called The Harold. I quote at length this self-undermining bit of creative legislation because all its caveats capture perfectly the balancing act between the enabling constraint on one hand and the liberated lawlessness of absurdist improvisation on the other.

The first rule in Harold is that there are no rules. Still, a basic Harold usually takes on a general structure described as follows.… The team solicits a suggestion for a theme from the audience, and begins a warm-up game to share their ideas and attitudes about the theme. …Eventually, a couple of players usually start a scene. Normally, it's unrelated to the theme, although it can be inspired by elements of the warm-up game. Once the scene is established, it will be cut off by a second scene, one which has as little to do with the first scene as it has to do with the theme. After a third scene is similarly presented, the ensemble will then

participate in what is generally referred to as a "game," although the event may bear little resemblance to the audience's notion of a game.

The initial three scenes usually return again. This time, they may have some bearing on the theme. Or, maybe not. After a second group game, the scenes return for one last time, often tying into each other and the theme, and as many elements from the scenes and games as possible."

. . . its structure is similar to a three-act play. (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

The fiction, the content, of the Harold is allowed a similar freedom. Though the audience selects a theme, "It is also important to remember that the Harold is *not about* the theme. It is only *inspired* by the theme. The Harold is about the ideas extracted from the theme by each individual player, starting with the opening exercise." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

This brings us back to a question haunting netprov: Which is more important, the performance or the text it produces? The creators of the Harold, arch-performers and seemingly focused only on performance, are nonetheless pointing us toward the principle that we don't really know what the piece is about until it is over. Content is not planned and executed, it is discovered.

Improv: Connections and Revelations

So, if the content, the fiction of improv, according to Del Close and the Chicago school, is not about dramatic conflict what *is* it about? According to Halpern, Close and Johnson it is about connections. "Where do the really best laughs come from? Terrific connections made intellectually, or terrific revelations made emotionally." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993) With an idealism that foreshadows McGonigal's the authors make their own connection from the fictional world back to the real world: "The connections are always there; they run through our work and through our lives. When you notice the richness of connections in a Harold on stage, then you can go out and live your own Harold." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

Strong Feedback on Stage

Theatrical improvisers in front of an audience receive immediate and authentic feedback, so important to Jane McGonigal's game theory, in the form of laughter – if it's a good night and they're not dying out there. Authentic laughter is notoriously difficult to fake. Theatrical improvisers also receive immediate feedback from their fellow improvisers in the form of a continuation of play. This peer-to-peer feedback is rich with information: appreciation of the first player's play, and acknowledgment of the generative possibilities the first player opened up by following up on them.

Improv vs. Skit Comedy

There is a distinction between what I would call "pure improv" where all the action is improvised such as Del Close and Charna Halpern's Improv Olympics in Chicago, and hybrids of memorized skit comedy and improv such as the Second City in Chicago and Toronto and the Groundlings in Los Angeles. A typical Chicago Second City stage show will have approximately 90% memorized material and 10% improvised segments.

In improv, ideas are worked out in play, on stage, in front of an audience, within the fiction. Skit comedy is developed around a conference table, in conversation. Quoting actor and Second City veteran George Wendt.

> " 'To me, taking a theme and working on your feet —- without discussions, qualifications, setups, blackouts, and the like – is a much purer and easier way to find kernels of scenes that could be expanded and written,' explains Wendt. 'The exact opposite would be the Second City approach, which is to take a bunch of suggestions and write them on a piece of paper, stand backstage in the Green Room, and stare at a blackboard with a bunch of suggestions on it —- basically stare at a blackboard with words on it. I got nothing from that. Second City was a constant struggle for me in terms of being fun to improvise and in terms of creating material." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

Netprov such as *Grace, Wit & Charm* uses both processes: first, pure improv on stage and in texts written and published "on the spot" and second, pre-written texts workshopped and written in advance. Seemingly different, what these two processes share is a game-like mechanism, either a process (e.g. on-the-spot live performance) or a premise (e.g. characters from different fictional worlds meet) that generate and limit the possible creative moves.

The Saturday Night Live Empire: The Skit Comedy Process as Alternative to Literary Process

Colloquially what is often meant by the "improv" tradition encompasses a particular intertwined set of North American entertainment enterprises. Writer/actors often come to prominence by following a path that mimics the historic development of these enterprises.

The path starts with the Second City, the cabaret skit comedy theater that began in Chicago and opened a second theater in Toronto. The American television show *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) drew heavily from the actors, writers and writer/actors of the Chicago Second City, as the Canadian television show *Second City Telev*ision (*SCTV*) drew from the Toronto Second City cabaret. Another tributary were writers and writer/actors who had met writing the college parody Harvard Lampoon. (This path is very similar to the path taken by the *Monty Python* writer/actors, most of whom learned their skills in Oxford and Cambridge skit comedy organizations). Generations of writer/actors including John Belushi, Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, Eddie Murphy, Mike Meyers have passed through this system. To this day most of the new *Saturday Night Liv*e writer/actors come from Second City or from the similar Los Angeles troupe, the Groundlings.

From these television shows writer/actors began to be cast in Hollywood feature movies, which they sometimes also wrote. These movies often featured characters from television skits that were fleshed out to become longer stories.

Taken together, the mass media television shows and movies done by writer/actors who passed through some or all of the parts of the *SNL* empire share some characteristics. They are long on character and short on story. They are acutely parodic and satirical. There is a breezy naturalism to the best of the acting – Bill Murray, Catherine O'Hara, Mike Meyers – and a cutting comic brilliance to the best of the writing – Tina Fey, Harold Ramis – that are markedly different from writing done either in traditional literary or "serious theater" traditions.

I attribute this difference to the different process – a process that is essentially playful— based on building from the ground up in a mimicry-parody-satire way, rather than building from writing alone.

The broad *SNL* world also suggests a different path for a work to come to a wide audience. For most of the 20th century the prototypical path was for a more-or-less successful novel, written in the typical solitary way, to be adapted into a movie and then find a wide audience. In the *SNL* world characters such as Wayne and Garth, who went on to populate the *Wayne's World* movies, can begin in an improv game, be refined into a skit, and then be scripted into a full-length feature film with a traditional Hollywood Story and then find its wider audience. The *SNL* process closely resembles netprov projects such as *Grace, Wit & Charm* with its pre-plotted narratives and workshopped characters.

An ARG Before Its Time: "Gotcha!"

I can't leave the history of improv without relating an eerie, distant and significant prefiguring of Jane McGonigal's formulation of ARGs. This was, according to Del Close's biographer Kim "Howard" Johnson, a long-running, real-life game among different groups of actors, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, that purportedly began in 1962 during a visit to London by the Second City troupe.

> The game was called, by some accounts, Gotcha! Players would point their index
> finger with thumb cocked, and the other fingers curled back. They would get three

shots per day to shoot fellow players, who had to die in the most elaborate, dramatic manner possible under the circumstances. According to [actor Avery] Schrieber, there were only three exceptions to this rule: players could not be shot if they were (1) onstage working, (2) carrying a pot of boiling water, or (3) holding an expensive camera (apparently instituted by Del after he bought an expensive camera). (Johnson 2008)

In this game, so redolent of the emergent street surrealism of the '60s, no points were tallied, the goal was aesthetic, the ethics were heart-felt and noble. Pretending to die extravagantly in public was a heroic mission of bringing imagination into the humdrum every day. One was scoring a point of honor in service of the imagination.

What Netprov Can Learn From Theater

When it comes to **people**, theater has riches to bestow about creative collaboration and ways of balancing the psychology of competitive egos with the good of the project as a whole. In particular, Del Close's counter-traditional, non-agonistic principle of agreement is an important gift. Netprov can use as a model the SNL style show, inspired and fueled by improv, but written more like a scripted show. From Commedia Dell'Arte and the improv traditions, theater gives remarkable examples of the important role of the writer/actor. The skit comedy process of an actor "finding" a character in improv games or in comedy writing, getting inside that character's skin and developing and embodying that character over is powerful and effective for netprov.

As to **form**, the Harold with its self-correcting openness is a wonderful example of a parliamentary set of rules that allows for invention but still tends to assure a good evening's entertainment. Both of Del Close's definitions of games—as everyday unconscious psychological tactics and as formal constraints for theatrical improvisation —are important to netprov.

For *Grace, Wit & Charm* I drew upon a couple of specific theater concepts, including the idea of "beat" as part of its basic working tools. "Beat" has several meanings in theater,

but the concept we used was the beat as a narrative sub-unit—a particular piece of action and/or dialogue that advances the story. In theater a beat is a unit smaller than a scene. An example of a beat: Character A and Character B argue and Character B storms out of the room. Another specific borrowing from theater was a warm-up exercise for the writer/actors I had us play. It was a written version of a Del Close game called "The Invocation." "Del created an exercise where students invoke a 'god' that they create themselves from their own group vision." (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993) The steps to the game are: describe the god, talk directly to it, then worship the god.

Theater contributes to the **fiction** not only the full, deep tradition of classic theater, but the powerful (and hilarious) mimicry-parody-satire connection of the improv scene and its descendents. In particular I see an important synergy between Jane McGonigal's idea that games can be used to fix real life and the healing impulse of satire.

5_Mass Media Inspirations for Netprov

While mass media provide a wealth of self-important styles ready to be parodied and satirized, I have long had the impression that direct inspirations from this field – projects similar to netprov—are hard to come by. Antoinette LaFarge, in her essay *A World Exhilarating and Wrong: Theatrical Improvisation on the Internet*, tells us why this is so. She notices " . . . one glaring absence from the major Western communicative media discussed above: cinema. American cinema, with its commitment to ideas of naturalism and realism, has been particularly inhospitable to the non-rational discourse of verbal playfulness. … One must look all the way back to W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers – who, not incidentally, also came out of the vaudeville tradition – for predecessors who would have appreciated the physical and verbal elaborations of online theater." (LaFarge 1995)

LaFarge is correct. Direct inspirations for netprov from mass media are almost all marginal – rebels and iconoclasts such as *The Goon Show* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Even though mainstream television has made a place for improv in shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, this is tamed improv. Little free-roaming, anarchic, dangerous improv remains. *SNL* is the improv spirit under corporate control. The main ideas netprov *can* draw from mass media are structural and formal.

Welcome to Pawnee

"Welcome to the city of Pawnee, Indiana," states the home page of www.pawneeindiana.com, which looks like a typical medium-sized town civic website. "We are located 90 miles from Indianapolis and we are the state's seventh-largest city. This site will serve as your gateway to all that is Pawnee." So far everything looks normal. The first clue one might get is in the News and Notes section which lists the following items:

Animal Control has a few general, friendly reminders for all Pawnee residents. Close all windows in your house. Don't walk alone at night, and keep all house cats inside.

In unrelated news, two mountain lions have escaped from the Pawnee Zoo. (Deedle_Dee_Productions 2011)

What American TV audiences would know is that this, of course, is not the website of a real town, but a promotional website created in association with the popular TV show *Parks and Recreation*. In addition to basic information about the fictional town, readers can play trivia games based on the characters and connect other fans in social media.

This continuation of narratives simultaneously across multiple technical platforms is well described by media studies scholar Henry Jenkins, who researches the phenomena using the terms "convergence culture" and "transmedia storytelling."

Convergence Culture and Transmedia

Henry Jenkins provides a compact and useful history of the ongoing negotiation among cultures in America. "At the risk of painting with broad strokes," he writes in *Convergence Culture : Where Old and New Media Collide*, "the story of American arts in the nineteenth century might be told in terms of the mixing, matching and merging of folk traditions taken from various indigenous and immigrant populations." (Jenkins 2006) He follows this summary by useful generalizations of the 20th and 21st centuries: (Jenkins 2006)

> The story of American arts in the twentieth century might be told in terms of the displacement of folk culture by mass media." (Jenkins 2006)
>
> "The story of American arts in the twenty-first century might be told in terms of the public reemergence of grassroots creativity as every day people take advantage of new technologies that enable them to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. (Jenkins 2006)

The term convergence, he maintains, " . . . represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content. This book is about the work —- and play —- spectators perform in the new media system." (Jenkins 2006)

Jenkins's term transmedia describes precisely the deployment of communication technologies for *Parks and Recreation*, as well as *Grace, Wit & Charm*: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." (Jenkins 2007)

For this study of netprov it is interesting to note that Jenkins pays particular attention to the interpersonal roles and relationships transmedia necessitates: "Because transmedia storytelling requires a high degree of coordination . . . it has so far worked best either . . . where the same artist shapes the story across all of the media involved or in projects where strong collaboration (or co-creation) is encouraged . . ." And he uses a term strikingly similar to Del Close's "group mind:" "Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence." (Jenkins 2007) Jenkins's transmedia is in need of Del Close's improv wisdom.

Transmedia also is shares a fundamental gesture in common with Jane McGonigal's ARGs, which reach out into reality. Jenkins writes: "A transmedia text does not simply disperse information: it provides a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life." (Jenkins 2007)

Jenkins notes an aspect of this changing dynamic that threatens to change the politics of show business, and potentially the broader political structure of the society.

> Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for
> consumer participation. 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. Indeed, we have suggested that it is the interplay – and tension – between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape. (Jenkins 2006)

The literary performance group Invisible Seattle, with whom I played for years and about whom I wrote in my 1994 book *Invisible Rendezvous* had as a goal " … an attempt to inject an element of "fiction" into the so-called "reality" of an unsuspecting average American metropolis …" (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994) Transmedia as delineated by Jenkins would seem to be the perfect form in which to continue this quest.

Brave New Worlds

All of these transmedia ideas apply to netprov quite well. But it is another of Jenkins's observations that a powerful link is made to the form of the fiction itself. Jenkins quotes a screenwriter: "When I first started you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media." (Jenkins 2006) What we see in evidence in the suite of websites associated with *Parks and Recreation* is the transmedia construction of a place, a playground for fiction, a world of Pawnee.

The reason Jenkins's unnamed screenwriter's statement is so pointed is that this primacy of the world flies in the face of the conventional Hollywood culture where story was king. It signals us that transmedia projects like netprov are off of the traditional map of story-based mass media that had such close ties to novels and plays.

"More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building," Jenkins writes "as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise – since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions." (Jenkins 2006) Jenkins here is including the fans, the participants, these often uninvited co-players of the game. This poses the question: must world building be centralized, broadcast, top-down? Could it be grassroots, from the bottom up?

Pushing Back Against the Broadcast Model: Fan Fiction

Captain Jean-Luc Picard, ordered to take a vacation, crash lands on the planet of Tolkien's Middle Earth; Captain Picard meets Lord Elrond and, after some preliminary fumbling they have sex. (Lawrence 2008) This delightfully implausible scenario points out what happens when worlds collide. A collision between fictional worlds can only be done by fans, who can freely travel across interdimensional and copyright boundaries. The growing economic power of fans empowered by fan fiction and other fan activities has become a force to be reckoned with in the industries of mass media. Almost desperately, the entertainment corporations have begun to try to harness and co-opt this disruptive, improvisational fan fiction energy in "official" sites and games, but the unofficial, rogue sites still proliferate. Netprov offers a non-corporate channel for this fiction-making energy.

Behind-the-Scenes Parody and The Mockumentary Concept

An important precursor form of netprov from mass media is the "mockumentary," which uses the film rhetoric and tropes of documentaries to create a fiction. Examples in film include *This is Spinal Tap*, about a fictional heavy-metal rock band and Christopher Guest's *A Mighty Wind*, a spoof of the '60s folk music scene and *Best in Show,* which purports to follow competitors in a national dog show. Once unusual in strategy, mockumentaries reabsorbed into the mainstream in shows such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation,* where characters speak and mug directly to cameras seemingly wielded 24/7 by unseen documentarians.

These mockumentaries purport to take us behind-the-scenes, and therefore behind the social masks of the supposed documentary subjects. In each of these examples the tension between a public persona and a private reality both adds a flavor of unrehearsed authenticity to the projects and is automatically satirical.

The Silly Humor of Technologically Self-Aware Media

The occasional moments in which characters from the TV show the office directly talk to these unseen camera people – moments that to me, interestingly, seem to "break the rules" of the show's own game – point up one more mass media idea that plays directly into netprov. I would call this the phenomenon of **technologically self-aware media** and it is best represented by *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Time and time again the satire of *Monty Python* explicitly refers to conventions of TV that usually go unremarked and unspoken. My favorite example concerns the fact that, like many shows, *Monty Python* was mostly shot on video, but had budget for a certain amount of more expensive shooting on film, which was usually used for exteriors. In one episode the a character repeatedly goes from indoors to outdoors, loudly marveling at the fact that inside he is on video and outdoors he is on film.

This technological self-awareness can also become a political self-awareness. The pompous army officer who interrupts and censors certain *Monty Python* skits draws attention to unseen conventions of power and money normally hidden from mass media audiences. *The Goon Show* in the '50s poked fun at the stodgy BBC. American radio "shock jocks" such as Steve Dahl and Howard Sterne have gotten a lot of mileage over the years for their public quarrels with their bosses, "the suits" of corporate management. Of course this only continues to be broadcast if the quarrels continue to make money for those very corporations.

What Netprov Can Learn From Mass Media

To principles about **people** mass media adds a particular awareness of, and sensitivity to, the idea of audience participation since it breaks so strongly from the traditional, one-way broadcast model. Great care has been taken in recent years to cultivate fandoms for large

fictional worlds. Mass media scholarship also is powerfully aware of the general empowerment of the audience, which becomes a user and user creator. Netprov offers organized, coordinated outlets for participatory creativity that are not subject to broadcast media control.

Transmedia is a crucially important **form** idea for netprov since it alone, among ideas from all the other fields, breaks with the concept of the single artwork, the single show, the single game 'playing field' and describes a distributed, multiple, parallel artwork that can eventually even include audience-created additions not foreseen by a project's initial creators. Basic structural ideas such as sit-com plots have been useful in netprov and proto-netprov projects. I used a typical two-plot structure from the typical structure of half-hour Television situation comedies in *Friday's Big Meeting*. Technologically self-aware parody offers opportunities to comment directly and pointedly about emerging media.

Mainstream mass media **fiction** tends to operate according to a tried-and-true set of explicit and implicit Hollywood rules about characterization, plot and art direction. These lumbering, cliché-ridden films and television shows serve netprov best as juicy targets for parody. Parody of mass media also is, in a sense, an audience building maneuver, since the mainstream blockbusters are among the few cultural objects large numbers of people still share. Overall, portable computer-based entertainment has tended to individualize and personalize—and thereby fragment—cultural consumption. Playing off of mainstream mythoi is socially bonding, in a sense. On the other hand, direct, positive inspiration from the netprov projects I have participated in has come mostly from *Monty Python* and other marginal, anti-mainstream creators.

6_Literary Inspirations for Netprov

Though as a general rule the assertion I made above in Chapter 2 in defining netprov holds—that the inspirations for netprov are not in the mainstreams of its contributing fields, but rather are found in their margins – a single exception is found in the field of literature. That exception is my conviction that netprov is an art form capable of the breadth, depth, subtlety and power that is found in the most loved plays and novels in the literary tradition. I am not saying that I have done it or even that I have seen it done, only that it is possible. That this conviction needs to be expressed here is evidence that I perceive the need to counteract a cultural prejudice which surfaces each time a new form arises and begins to contend with traditional forms. That prejudice mistakenly conflates a particular form with the power of the experiences it produces, and holds the experiences to be exclusive to that form. We only need remember the 18th century disparagement of Shakespeare's plays as mere popular culture as opposed to the high literature of his poems in the ancient style, or the vigorous opposition to the novel itself in that form's early days to see, and debunk, this pattern.

Netprov can be a great literary form. If it lives up to that greatness, however, it will do so through marginal means not drawn from the current literary mainstream.

Mimicry and the Impulse to Fiction

> "Wash Me!"
>> Traditional North American graffito written with fingertip on a dirty automobile window

The splendid, and perennially hilarious, gesture of inscribing "Wash Me!" in the vehicular dust contains the basic transaction of written fiction in microcosm. What is any

writing, after all, but the dead object that does – or mimics doing – what we know perfectly well only human beings can do: communicate with language. The car's "Wash me!" goes beyond that basic gesture, however. It both instantly calls into being an elaborate self-consciousness – some "one" who is aware of being dirty and that dirty is not a desirable state – and imperatively seeks action from the reader. This mimics what appears to be a transaction that needs a reply. At some level, however subconscious, the reader must process the request and choose to grant or refuse it. This is a text that, to put it in the language of vernacular psychology, "messes with the head" of the reader.

"Boo!"
            Rob Wittig's epitaph

The next basic gesture of fictionizing is to find venues where writing as already occurring for a certain purpose and to repurpose the venue for a different kind of writing. Artist Jenny Holzer's use of electronic signage usually used for advertising announcements to display statements such as "FATHERS OFTEN USE TOO MUCH FORCE" and "PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT" are an example of this. In fact, in these two lines of Holzer's show two different rhetorical strategies: first, a narrator making a statement, second, we have again an imperative which comes both from the electronic sign itself and also enacts the electronic sign's mimicry of real people who are unconsciously saying, or needing to say, the statement.

In all of these examples the formula is the same: a specific venue and written language that acts in a surprising and suggestive way in that venue. These are small works of literature that cannot be effective if the language appears in a venue already used for literature. To borrow a term from the field of visual art, this is site-specific literature; the site is essential for its meaning.

In netprov, the site of the written language is essential for its meaning. Netprov fictionalizes vernacular forms.

The Fictionalized Vernacular

Netprov's characteristic of works done in vernacular media connects with an old tradition of writing performing direct fictionalizations of vernacular writing styles and graphic forms. Another way of saying this is that fiction writers manage to find ways to lie in forms hitherto used to tell the truth. We tend to forget how novels once elaborately described their material provenance. Observe the elaborate dance, the weaving of the frame, in the opening of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

> INTRODUCTION.
> ON February the First 1887, the *Lady Vain* was lost by collision with a derelict when about the latitude 1° S. and longitude 107° W.
>
> On January the Fifth, 1888—that is eleven months and four days after—my uncle, Edward Prendick, a private gentleman, who certainly went aboard the *Lady Vain* at Callao, and who had been considered drowned, was picked up in latitude 5° 3′ S. and longitude 101° W. in a small open boat … He gave such a strange account of himself that he was supposed demented … The following narrative was found among his papers by the undersigned, his nephew and heir, but unaccompanied by any definite request for publication. …
>
> CHARLES EDWARD PRENDICK.
>
> (The Story written by Edward Prendick.)
>
> I. IN THE DINGEY OF THE "LADY VAIN."
>
> I DO not propose to add anything to what has already been written concerning the loss of the *Lady Vain*. (Wells 1896)

Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, describes a large-scale rhythm of high-culture borrowings from and contributions to popular culture: "The older American folk culture

was built on borrowings from various mother countries; the modern mass media builds upon borrowings from folk culture, the new convergence culture will be built on borrowings from various media conglomerates" (Jenkins 2006)

But here I think Jenkins is missing another tributary flowing into his convergence culture: direct fictionalization of vernacular non-fiction communications. Throughout literary history the gesture recurs: take the forms that people use to communicate and to transcribe language for private use and fictionalize them. Thus we have the confessional novel (a fake diary) such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Dracula*, and the epistolary novel (a fake exchange of letters) such as *Dangerous Liaisons*.

In fact I see two categories intertwining and cross-pollinating in literary history: self-consciously literary forms, stylistically set apart from everyday communication (with an aesthetic of heightened, artificial "literary" language), and the fictionalized vernacular, the satire of everyday communication (with an aesthetic of well-observed, naturalistic language – often only slightly heightened as a wink to the audience). This tributary of the fictionalized vernacular brings fresh energy and fresh stylistic and technical ideas into culture. If Jenkins is right and convergence culture operates largely by appropriation— folk culture becomes mass culture and is recaptured as folk culture – then the fictionalized vernacular is important as one of the few sources of true cultural innovation.

Note that my use of the term "vernacular" is modeled on the usage of that term in the field of graphic design, where it denotes signage, printed ephemera, and other graphic communications created by self-trained designers apart from professional norms. It is common practice among professional graphic designers to cultivate photo collections of vernacular design which they treat with great respect and use for inspiration and pure enjoyment. The term has consonances with the concept of "outsider art" in the fine arts.

Direct fictionalization of vernacular nonfiction happen can become self-consciously literary, as in the early history of the novel. In contemporary culture this transformation can be relatively rapid. The British TV show *The Office* used a fake documentary style in

which characters are aware of the camera, address an unseen interviewer beside the camera and sometimes look directly into the camera. The American version of *The Office* adopted this style and occasionally had characters acknowledge the documentarians, occasionally telling them to stop recording or go away, celebrating the freshness of the break from the traditional style in which characters are unaware of the cameras, and demonstrating how the writers were wrestling with the practicalities of the documentary conceit. But now, the American show *Parks and Recreation* now uses this fake documentary style with no explanation or self-awareness—no freshness. Because of the success of *The Office*, it has instantly become an inherited style and has become invisible to both the viewers and the writers.

Stylistically new literary tropes and new narrative shapes can enter the culture through mimicry and parody of actual practices that are themselves new. The increased use of writing for everyday personal communication in networked "conversational" settings, such as chat rooms and text messages, has given rise to conventional systems of abbreviation ("c u" for see you) and written substitutes for information conveyed by facial expression and body language (LOL for laughing out loud, JK for just kidding). These shorthand systems can then be pulled in to fictional systems, such as the misspellings and portmanteau words of *Grace, Wit & Charm*. These new styles can enter literature despite the fact that they are being satirized. It doesn't matter whether you admire someone's style or are scornful of it —- if you re-use it in a fictionalized way, it enters culture as a new voice.

Spontaneity and the Illusion of Spontaneity in Literature

"JONATHAN HARKER'S JOURNAL

3 October.—As I must do something or go mad, I write this diary." (Stoker 1973)

These opening words of Chapter 22 of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* remind us that use of a breathless style and claims of urgency are part of a literary tradition already old in

Stoker's time. These claims are, let us notice, merely a more elaborate and subtle version of the equally urgent "Wash Me!" that the automobile calls out. Harker's words (that is to say, Stoker's) create a powerful illusion of spontaneity, even in a laboriously crafted, printed book, since we know that the words *could have been* scribbled in the moment, preserved, transcribed and printed.

The spontaneous or supposedly spontaneous, first-person narrator has the effect of calling attention to the materiality and temporality of writing. Just a moment, dear reader of this thesis—I'll be right back. I'm dehydrated and need a drink. Hang on.

The gothic tradition in literature, from Horace Walpole through Edgar Poe and Mark Twain, uses the foggy border zone between reality and fiction—as realized by plausible rhetorical and graphic forms such as the breathless "found manuscript"—as a way of dealing with subject matter that is equally eerie and borderline. Netprov's repurposing for fiction of digital technologies usually used for ephemeral, informal communication provides great opportunities for a written illusion of spontaneity, since the technologies themselves are used in just this breathless way. This tactic is just one of a number of purely verbal ruses in the tradition of literary fiction that which can contribute to netprov.

Too Much Information—Self-Revelation in the Fictionalized Vernacular

A literary strategy that often goes hand in hand with the fictionalized vernacular is the deployment of characters whose first-person accounts reveal much more about themselves than they intend. Social situations where a person is being too self-revealing for interlocutors' comfort—typically with grisly medical or emotional details—are signaled in mass media culture by the gesture covering one's ears and intoning: "too much information" (TMI in the common written and spoken abbreviation). This strategy is sometimes referred to in literary criticism as the untrustworthy narrator. It puts author and reader in the position of seeing more about characters than they see about themselves. The interesting thing about this strategy is that, by extension, it encourages readers to consider that there are things about themselves that they, too, do not see. Yet.

The goal of this strategy I would contend is insight; insight first about the characters, and second, about the reader's own self or selves.

Violating the Border Between Form and Content: Technologically Self-Aware Writing

The illusion of urgency calls attention to the physical disposition of the writer and the communication medium, and by extension, serves as a reminder of the materiality of the medium for the reader. Perhaps the supreme literary example is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which systematically breaks so many rules of book construction: mis-numbering pages, inserting end-papers in the middle of the book, and on a semantic level, apologizing to characters suspended "waiting on the stairs" during an authorly digression. Part of the delight of *Tristram Shandy* lies in how Sterne leads his readers into border violations between form and content.

Even in Sterne's time, early in the life of the novel, a set of conventions of graphic design on one hand, and narrative form on the other had formed into a package of attributes which was intended to be unnoticed by the reader. For example, graphic design conventions held that the author, reader and characters were to ignore the particular placement of text on the pages, the type of paper used and the physical relationship of one text to the other. Narrative conventions of time held that the author could describe the actions of characters, digress at any length and then return to the action of the characters without any time having passed within the story. Sterne makes his readers aware of the physical structure of the book and makes his characters aware of his digressive absence. The conventionally separated worlds of form and content have hereby undergone a border violation. The reader has been lead to the dangerous edge of belief and disbelief that Callois describes in writing of the game of mimicry: "The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell." (Salen and Zimmerman 2006) Sterne breaks the spell and dares readers to still believe. Readers must deny reality and choose to still believe or find some way to live in a world where their complicity in the fiction has been exposed. Sterne's border violations, his structural satire, implicates both the practices of fiction and

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the practices of real life in which so many social fictions—of hierarchy and power—are maintained.

Like the *Monty Python* character cited above, who loudly notices that indoors he is on video and outdoors he is on film, the frame-breaking humor of a novels such as *Tristram Shandy* is a practical method to make the invisible visible for a wide audience. It is a kind of structural satire that provokes structural insight. The very silliness of silly humor rests in the fact that it calls into question basic, assumed rules of existence. Self awareness and comedy go together; so often what is being satirized in satire is the *non*-self-awareness, the cluelessness, of the target. Sometimes the rules contravened are unchangeable, like death and gravity, but sometimes they are arbitrary, like particular, pompous modes of TV news delivery that prejudice the content while claiming impartiality and neutrality.

Antoinette LaFarge, writing from a theater background, makes the literary connection in a way that is apt for netprov. "In the realm of fiction, the long Western tradition of comic, satirical, and surreal fiction feeds online theater," she writes. "Online interactions tend toward verbal extravagance inherited (directly or indirectly) from such writers as Petronius, François Rabelais, Flann O'Brien, Raymond Roussel, and a James Joyce." (LaFarge 1995)

LaFarge cites a wonderful example: "In online theater, the story, the space, and the characters merge in curious ways. The Irish humorist Flann O'Brien (who also wrote as Myles na Gopaleen) had a keen nose for the absurdities inherent in the fact that authors control their characters. In one of his novels, there is a character named Mr. Trellis who is, in turn, writing his own novel …" (LaFarge 1995) In O'Brien's book Mr. Trellis forces all his characters to live with him at the same hotel. As LaFarge sees clearly, new, digital venues of inscription offer spaces where the basic elements of mimicry and fictionizing can be amplified by technological self-awareness to create a fruitful creative playground.

Facsimile Graphic Design

With notably self-conscious exceptions like *Tristram Shandy*, fake vernacular literary fictions were easy to make look like factual books – orderly columns of gray text— because all books were designed and made in very similar ways for economic reasons. To their eternal glory, the first publishers of *Tristram Shandy* went to the considerable extra expense of binding marbled endpapers in the center of the book and other similar gestures. James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* each used parodic typography, none of which fully broke with book decorum.

There have always been graphic parodies and satires, however. They have lurked at the margins of literature, since most "serious" literary satirists have chosen or been persuaded to dress their texts in the same typographic puritan gray as other "serious" works.

The direct graphic design inspirations for netprov begin with the *Harvard Lampoon* of the 1960s, which each year attempted to graphically imitate a particular mainstream magazine well enough to fool the reader at first glance. This directly led to the *National Lampoon*, a commercial magazine, run by *Harvard Lampoon* veterans. National Lampoon side projects included the *National Lampoon's 1964 High School Yearbook Parody* (O'Rourke ed. and Kenney ed. 2003) (which closely resembled a typical American High School yearbook, including handwritten notations by the fictional students through which a portrait of the characters and relationships emerged) and the *National Lampoon Sunday Newspaper Parody* (O'Rourke ed. and Hughes ed. 2004) (a complete, miniature, newspaper on newsprint paper including all the typical sections of an American Sunday newspaper which, upon careful reading, revealed intrigue and scandal in the community) were among the most elaborately designed tributes to their vernacular models. The *High School Yearbook Parody* in particular has long seemed to me a perfect example of non-linear narrative; a complex account of the dramas of the school year emerges no matter what order one reads the work.

A step away from the faux-vernacular lampoons lies the whole world of comics – for decades the arch example of popular culture that would be contrasted with the high culture of literature. Without getting sidetracked, let me just share how Antoinette LaFarge in her discussion of theatrical improvisation on the Internet points directly to the fact that "Cartoonists working within the traditions of satire or verbal comedy often come up with dialogue particularly reminiscent of online theater. George Herriman's Krazy Kat comes to mind, as do Walt Kelly's early Pogo strips." (LaFarge 1995)

Imitation of vernacular graphic design is a fundamental part of *Grace, Wit & Charm* (and its fake-Internet-startup website) and the other netprov projects I have done.

Inventing New Literary Forms: The Oulipo

A group of French mathematicians and writers meet for dinner on a fine Paris autumn evening in 1958; they delight each other in reading texts created by mathematical systems. The literary formulae of the French literary group Oulipo, workshop for potential literature, are game-like both in their use of rules and occasionally in an implied sense of competition. Note that the social infrastructure of the Oulipo is based around ritual monthly dinners. These dinners might seem like a social structure apart from, and unconnected with, their literary activities. I these dinners—during which members of the group share projects, play literary games, challenge and support each others' work—as an exact parallel to the *camaraderie* of the Commedia Dell'Arte.

The Oulipo writers often frame their practices as "games" in a way that both corresponds to my definition above of mimicry-based creative games and at the same time corresponds closely to Jane McGonigal's definition of games. Oulipean techniques are obstacles; obstacles are possible in creative games, but not necessary. Oulipean Harry Mathews writes:

> The Oulipo supplies writers with hard games to play. They are adult games
> insofar as children cannot play most of them; otherwise they bring us back to a

familiar home ground of our childhood. Like Capture the Flag, the games have demanding rules that we must never forget (well, hardly ever), and these rules are moreover active ones: satisfying them keeps us too busy to worry about being reasonable. Of course our object of desire, like the flag to be captured, remains present to us. Thanks to the impossible rules, we find ourselves doing and saying things we would never have imagined otherwise, things that often turn out to be exactly what we need to reach our goal. (Mathews 1997)

Mathews goes on to describe his friend French writer George Perec's composition of a novel that does not contain the letter e. Mathews relates

Some undefined and crucial element in it is both missing from it and threatening it - something as central as the letter e to the French language, as primordial as one's mother tongue. The tone is anything but solemn, and yet by accepting his curious rule and exploring its semantic consequences, Perec succeeded in creating a vivid replica of his own plight - the orphaned state that had previously left him paralyzed as a writer. (Mathews)

Mathews relates similar breakthrough in his own ability to confront difficult memories in fiction in his Oulipean novel *Cigarettes*, and concludes: "For Perec and me, writing under constraint proved to be not a limitation but a liberation. Our unreasonable home grounds were what had at last enabled us to come home." (Mathews)

The Oulipo, in their own works and in their careful scholarship of precursor works they call *plagiarists in advance*, are connoisseurs of technologically self-aware writing. As Oulipeans point out, the sweet new style of the Renaissance, with its fascination with elaborate schemes of rhyme and meter, is constantly forcing readers to simultaneously process semantic meaning along with the arbitrary musicality of language.

The People Side of Literature: Precursors of the Writer/Actor

Although writing has been predominantly a solitary act, let's remember that Dickens, among others, was known to privately "embody" and act out characters as he composed, throwing his body and voice into what the theater field would call "getting inside the character." His public readings later reprised in performance these roles that had begun behind closed doors.

Outrunning the Inner Censor: Surrealist Automatic Writing

Writing is a notoriously difficult thing to do – it is a form of athletic performance—and information about chemical and behavioral ways that help writers get "into the zone" and produce worthy text has been discussed among writers for centuries. In the early 1920s in Paris; a group of young writers would gather in a small apartment to perform automatic writing, letting their hands outpace their minds, reading the texts aloud and dazzling each other with the jolting incongruities. These were the Surrealists. In Modern literature there is an avant-garde tradition of formal and informal writing games among the Dadas and Surrealists, such as Tristan Tzara's drawing a poem word by word from a hat, and the American Beat writers Burroughs and Gysin's "cut up" technique using scissors to cut up existing text and compose a new text from the fragments. The Surrealists used automatic writing precisely to undermine their own educations and to further their idealistic avant-gardism. Netprov projects such as *Grace, Wit & Charm* use the speed of exchange and the pressure of improvisation, in part, for these same purposes.

Inconsistent, Weak Feedback

To look at the literary tradition in terms of McGonigal's principles of games, feedback for the writer is unreliable and idiosyncratic. Some writers read drafts to spouse or trusted friends. Some editors employed by publishers give the writer detailed feedback, sometimes to the point of being co-creators of the work. Critics write reviews; fans write mail. Some writers read their work in public and receive applause. None of these moments of feedback are necessary to the process; traditional literary work can be, and sometimes is, written in utter isolation.

An Office for Collaborative Play: The Bureau of Surrealist Research

A storefront office opened at 15 rue de Grenelle in Paris in 1924; its painted window and its letterhead proclaim: The Bureau of Surrealist Research. Behind the desk collecting dream data and automatic writing experiments was the bureau's intense young director, an actor named Antonin Artaud. Essentially a parody of a scientific laboratory, it was home to a variety of writing games and experiments in its short existence. The conceptual frame was intended to run counter to traditional processes and principles of artistic production and to propose in their stead a more rigorous and rule-based set of processes. In terms of social infrastructure it was essentially a clubhouse for the Surrealists and their friends. The meta-frame of the "parody office" served as a fictional frame, a proto-netprov. It was both a project in itself and a container for other projects.

Generative Collaboration: The Church of the Subgenius

A frenetic and brilliantly loquacious preacher took the stage of a small Chicago underground theater in 1991. I was in the audience. The pseudonymous Reverend Ivan Stang wiped the sweat from his brow and ranted: "Apostates accuse us, dear friends, of selling out. Selling out? Selling out? We have been trying to sell out for years . . . but there have BEEN NO TAKERS!" The important and talented group of writers and performers associated with the Church of the Subgenius has done projects since the 1980s that share many of the characteristics of netprov.

The organization, legally a real church but essentially a fictional church, is an ongoing collaborative satire of American evangelical church culture, UFO enthusiasts, and other marginal groups. It occupies and subverts traditional church structures and the media of church communications to advance the fiction—services, titles and hierarchy, "devivals," concerts, pamphlets, books, visual art, radio broadcasts, websites, podcasts.

- If you are what they call "different" —
- If you think we're entering a new Dark Ages —
- If you see the universe as one vast morbid sense of humor —

- If you are looking for an inherently bogus religion that will condone superior degeneracy and tell you that you are "above" everyone else —
- If you can help us with a donation –

The Church of the Subgenius could save your sanity! (Stang et al. 1979)

It is collaborative, allowing membership (for a price) but also encouraging schisms and debate. Broad plot lines unfold in real time, for example, the assassination and purported resurrection of the church's prophet, J.R. "Bob" Dobbs. The unspoken rule is that Subgenius figures always stay in character and always deny that what they are doing is art.

Generative Collaboration: Invisible Seattle

"Excuse me, we're building a novel, may we borrow a few of your words?" Starting in the early '80s, roughly the same era as the Church of the Subgenius, inspired by tales of Dada performance and Surrealist expeditions, fans of the Oulipo, enamored of a vision of intellectual life in the cafes of Paris, the 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 and created a vivid snapshot of Seattle in the summer of 1983, the book *Invisible Seattle*. I have chronicled these adventures at length in my own 1995 book, *Invisible Rendezvous*. (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994)

Surrealism, Church of the Subgenius and Invisible Seattle as "Worlds"

Using the new transmedia model Henry Jenkins notes in which the creation of fictional "worlds" has superseded the creation of story and character, gives me at last a way to talk about an aspect of Surrealism that has always intrigued me. By insisting that Surrealism was not an art style, not an aesthetic, but a way of life, Breton and the Surrealists created a meta-structure that surrounded any particular piece of writing, book, art exhibition or even creative career. Surrealism was modeled on a political movement (issuing 'manifestos,' the everyday French word for a political party platform), or a scientific movement, which could contain any possible member actors and actions. The deep cultural roots of this idea of inner adherence lie in the centuries of sectarian religious conflict in Europe, which rotated on the crucial, unobservable act of accepting or rejecting certain minor variants of dogma and thereby "becoming" a Catholic or Protestant worthy, depending on the setting, of salvation or murder. In the 20s in France one could similarly "become" a Communist, a Freudian or a Surrealist.

The religious roots of this act of imaginative inner transformation become clear when we look at the key creative gesture of the Subgeniuses. The genius of the Church of the Subgenius is that by using one word they explain the rules of their collaborative creative game, the word "church." We are pretending to be a church, their gesture says. Or, more accurately, they *are* actually legally and in every way a church, but of course they are not. They are "an inherently bogus religion that will tell you that you are better than everyone else" as their literature tells us. The invitation to play and participate is broad and comprehensible. Their target audience is well-defined in their own literature: outsiders who feel alone in the sea of American religious conservatism and need an attitude that will help them survive and thrive as a tiny minority in a hostile society. "Do people think you're strange? Do you? …THEN YOU MAY BE ON THE RIGHT TRACK!" says one of their earliest tracts. " 'Unpredictables' are not alone and possess amazing hidden powers of their own! Are You Abnormal? THEN YOU PROBABLY ARE BETTER THAN MOST PEOPLE! YES! YOUR KIND SHALL TRIUMPH!" (Stang et al. 1979)

If you want to "join" the subgeniuses, do anything that is church-like (in particular like the independent Southern US fundamentalist churches which they most closely parody): go to church, start your own church, preach, write, proselytize. The thing I most admire about the flexibility of the Subgeniuses' "world" is that it perfectly accommodates creative disagreements. If you don't like how some other Subgenius preacher is doing things, you are encouraged to break away and form your own schismatic church—just as long as you have a spectacular and public battle – just like churches have done for centuries in real life! In this world, parody is the perfect organizer. The Subgeniuses' largely self-consistent world has grown for decades with elaborate characters, narratives, backstories, writing and preaching.

What I still find so exciting about Invisible Seattle all these years is the deadpan proposition of an *invisible* Seattle, parallel and intermingled with the visible one, that is accessed by acts of imagination. "Every time you read a book you enter Invisible Seattle" goes one of the mottos. "Invisible Seattle is the antidote for your feeling of completeness" goes another. (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994) Becoming a citizen depended on insight, on seeing the invisible—from noting the invisible forces of politics and economics to tracing cultural quotations back to their source. The map of Invisible Seattle shows the Eiffel Tower instead of the Space Needle, since the Needle so clearly cites the Tower. In the early '80s Philip Wohlstetter would spin yarns of finding evidence of a "parallel university" that quietly occupied unused classrooms at the University of Washington and, from the notes on the chalkboards, was offering much more interesting courses than the real university. Who were these unseen, more intelligent students and teachers? How could we meet them? How could we become them? This, too operates according the mechanics of a religious inner transformation, in this case the "enlightenment" of Buddhism and Taoism. After enlightenment, nothing has changed, but everything has changed, since one's attitude toward the world has been transformed.

The proposition of these alternate realities, these worlds, these games, is to transform our everyday lives. They are only slightly more stylized, ritualized and self-conscious than the semi-conscious and unconscious choices we make when we decide what clothes to

wear (showing membership in some social group, goth, emo, bear), how to style our hair, or which subculture's vocabulary to adopt. The goal of Surrealism, of the Church of the Subgenius, of Invisible Seattle is to awake in the morning in our same old beds with a brand new attitude: more creative, more proactive, more empowered, more alive.

When Worlds Collide

Part of the pleasure of fan fiction is the way in which it produces insight by breaking the internal rules of a given fictional world, thereby, in Roger Callois's terms, breaking the spell by which the actor fascinates the spectator, which he cites as the unique rule of mimicry. A further pleasure is the willful intermingling of characters and settings from vastly different fictional worlds. Antoinette LaFarge points out that this is a particular temptation in digital settings: "Similarly weak boundaries between author and character and between one story and another are a feature of online theater by virtue of the fact that players invent their roles under the spur of the moment. In an improvisation called "Guilty as Lambs, Innocent as Sin," the scene was a courtroom where two characters were disputing custody of a third. By the end, however, the performance had been infiltrated by a number of characters from the O.J. Simpson murder trial . . ." (LaFarge 1995)

What can be added to Callois's idea of "breaking the spell" is the possibility of a moment where the supposedly invisible spell is made visible, but still does not ruin the game because another, higher-order game is being played. Again, like the Subgeniuses, we pull the wool over our own eyes.

Participation and The Anger of the Fans; The Parable of George R.R. Martin

Finally, it is interesting to note that even in traditional literary publishing the participatory expectations of the digital age are becoming apparent. A recent New Yorker article by Laura Miller chronicled the tribulations of bestselling author fantasy fiction author George R.R. Martin, whose pace of work (slow) on the next installment of his popular

fictional "world," the series *A Tale of Ice and Fire,* has come under fire from a legion of Internet superfans-cum-"haters" who evidence a proprietary and participatory attitude to this traditional lone author. Miller relates: " … the discontent soon spilled over into other platforms—from science-fiction and fantasy forums to discussion boards on Amazon.com. One poster wrote, "George R. R. Martin, you suck. . . . Pull your fucking typewriter out of your ass and start fucking typing." (L. Miller 2011) Miller quotes Martin responding to fans who were resentful of the time Martin had spent watching football, as he had shared on his blog, when he could have been writing. Instead of being grateful for Martin's creativity, these readers feel that his story is a natural resource that he's hoarding.

The empowerment of the audience which I wrote about even fifteen years ago in *Invisible Rendezvous* as a speculative and distant ideal appears to have occurred, uninvited, even in the work of authors such as Martin who appear to want things to still be operating according to the older broadcast model in which the audience waited obediently for the next installment.

What Netprov Can Learn from Literature

On the **people** side, literature offers mostly models of individual writing process for note-taking, drafting and finalizing text. Rare groups like the Surrealists and Subgeniuses offer models of collaborative creation that correspond to what McGonigal calls lightweight asynchronous collaboration. By proposing a frame-project (the Surrealist's political-style revolution in cultural/ social policy, validating chance and the subconscious) or a frame fiction (the Subgeniuses' constantly self-undermining fake religion) these groups send out an invitation to participation that is easy to understand and easy to accept. Although fan fiction is most active in the field of mass media, it is a form of writing, and therefore technically a literary activity. The empowerment of the reader represented by fan fiction crosses into even traditional literature, as we've seen in the example of George R. R. Martin. There are also some examples in literature of the writer/actor role which is so important to netprov.

As for **form**, literature has a rich tradition of written and graphic design mimicry, parody and satire that can be used as inspiration for netprov projects. But its true wealth is its treasure trove of narrative devices. From rhetorical strategies such as novels in letters and novels in documents to large-scale novelistic effects such as the creation of coherent worlds such as Balzac's Paris in *The Human Comedy* series or Tolkien's Middle Earth— literature provides netprov with a vast catalog of formal structures. Examples of technologically self-aware texts abound in the literary tradition, including the materially constrained texts created and curated by the Oulipo. These rich, formal structures from literature are what I see most often lacking in ARGs, which tend to use a smaller selection of formal structures drawn from mass media and games. The promise I see for netprov could perhaps be boiled down to a combination of the participatory savvy of ARGs and the narrative devices of literature. Put these two elements together and great things can happen

When it comes to **fiction**, the literary tradition, both traditional and avant-garde, is an enormous wellspring of inspiration. The literary tradition sets a high standard of intelligence, subtlety and pointedness in its portrayal of places, of characters, and of plot dynamics that is often missing from mass media and games. The increasingly conservative and narrow range of permissible plots and characters funded by major Hollywood movie and television productions induces a limited vision that affects the game and Internet fields. The vast literary tradition offers many inspirations for approaches that will seem fresh and vivid in netprov.

7_ Internet, Social Media and Personal Media Inspirations for Netprov

Often referred to as the first novel, *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty years all alone in an un-inhabited island on the Coast of AMERICA, near the mouth of the Great River of OROONOQUE; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. WITH An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by PYRATES.* was published in 1719, and was credited on its title page as being "Written by Himself." (Defoe and Crowley 1972) The actual author's name, Daniel Defoe, appears nowhere in the first edition. I use the work's actual title here instead of the usual, misleading, abbreviated version, to remind my readers how the fictionizing impulse looks when it first appears in a new medium.

How long does it take to realize a web site is fake? Back in the early days of web 1.0, in the 1990s, it might have taken quite a long time, since graphic and rhetorical standards of trustworthiness had not yet been subconsciously negotiated by web society. Daniel Defoe was writing in a period that was the ink-and-paper equivalent of web 1.0, when libelous broadsheets circulated widely and wildly, and when frauds and pirate editions abounded.

Let's pause to remember the larger outlines of the desktop publishing revolution and the web revolution. Up until the beginning of the 1990s typeset text was the exclusive province of those who could afford expensive typesetting equipment. A nearly identical system of printing, publishing and distribution had been in existence at that time for over 200 years. The owners of these means of production, printers and publishers, provided a gatekeeping function, exercising judgment over whose text merited the cost of typography. Typeset text carried, therefore, an automatic aura of authority.

Around 1990, however, the combination of new desktop printing and new, What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG) word processing programs meant, effectively, that typesetting was available to many more people at a much lower production cost. Cultural inertia continued to provide typeset text with the aura of authority, but the gatekeeping function began to gradually fall away.

The World Wide Web's (WWW) original graphic design resembled the simple typography of word processing. In other words, the web mimicked a manuscript and not a (edited, authorized) book, newspaper or magazine. WWW originator Tim Berners-Lee's graphic concept, such as it was, was essentially a vision of shared physics papers with illustrations and hyperlinks. Graphic designers, however, almost immediately began to push at the boundaries of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), realizing that the medium could mimic more than academic papers. The design conventions of the print world translated poorly into the new medium, so (as always happens at the infancy of new technologies) despite designers' attempts to reproduce the 'look of authority,' they wound up creating new graphic looks that were unattached to any cultural norms.
Then, as we know, thousands, tens of thousands, and eventually millions of people began to self-publish without the traditional gatekeepers. After 200 years of one consistent economic-social-graphic system, suddenly, as often was said at the time, 'you don't know what to trust on the web.' Just like in Daniel Defoe's day.

Our culture still has hardly begun to catch up with the sea-change this self-publishing revolution represents. News websites such as the New York Times and Politico still ape the black-on-white design of printed newspapers, but that reference will eventually fade as web-native designs establish their own authority. What concerns netprov, however, is a set of phenomena that were an almost immediate side effect of the expanding use of Tim Berners-Lee's physics-paper-sharing system. People began pouring their hearts out into it.

In a 2005 piece in *electronic book review* called "Justin Hall and the Birth of the 'Blogs" I describe my eagerness, in the mid-'90s to get back to my Internet connection at work on

a Monday and find out if blog pioneer Justin Hall had broken up with his girlfriend, or if they were still together. "As it turned out, it was time for Justin and his girlfriend to part ways." I wrote then. "But Justin has stuck with me over the years as my own first revelation of the powers of on-line serial literature." (Wittig 2005)This intimate confessional occurring *in real time* was fascinating to me. Justin was being honest, I presumed. But how powerful, I though, it could be to use this form for fiction.

Frauds and Fictions on the Web

How long does it take to realize a web site is fake? Genuinely fake websites exist. **419 Legal,** http://www.419legal.org (419Legal 2003) is a web forum that serves for a clearinghouse for information about out-and-out fraudulent websites. These sites are often support e-mail scams. The FBI has its own scam list at http://www.fbi.gov/scams-safety/e-scams . (FBI 2011)

Side-by-side with these frauds, however, are a spectrum of fake websites created for aesthetic rather than criminal purposes. I like to think of degrees of "fakeness" in terms of the amount of time creators want their readers to believe in the fake before they realize it is fake. This timing is accomplished by subtle adjustments to the plausibility of the writing and graphic design. Relatively longer times I refer to as "deadpan" sites, relatively faster times I refer to as "with a wink" sites.

Looking for expertise in male pregnancy? You'll have to dig for it among the barrage of plausible stock med-business imagery, but you'll find it at the deadpan **RYT Hospital Dwayne Medical Center** http://www.rythospital.com/2011 . 2011a)

Disturbed at finding dihydrogen monoxide in your home? You'll be surprised: this colorless, odorless liquid compound is found just about everywhere. The less deadpan **DHMO Research Division** can calm your fears at http://www.dhmo.org/ . (Way 2011) (DHMO is also sometimes written H20.)

Are you looking for a church where the worthwhile worship and the unsaved are unwelcome? Are you "Conservative, Godly, Republican and Unstoppable?" Then the **Landover Baptist Church**, with its heavily-mascaraed eye winking strongly, is for you! http://www.landoverbaptist.org . (Harper 1993) Landover fixture **Betty Bowers**, by her own admission "America's Best Christian," is so incredibly godly she has her own spin-off site, http://www.bettybowers.com/ (Bradley 2011) although she does look an awful lot like a man. Building on the rich transvestite theatrical tradition of the drag scene and drag queens—particularly the critically self-aware, postmodern drag movement that began in the 1980s and produced writer/actor characters such as RuPaul and Vaginal Davis— Betty Bowers is an ongoing single-character improvisation. Written and acted by Paul A. Bradley, Betty Bowers lampoons ultra-conservatives in a way that tracks with current events.

Drawing from Nature: The Realist Movement

The Modern movement in visual art begins with Gustave Courbet's realism. The Academic painting establishment held that the optimum way to paint clouds, water, the human figure and a thousand other conventional subjects had been discovered once and for all, scientifically, in the Renaissance. Art education consisted of passing along these conventional "tricks of the trade" which could all be achieved in the safe confines of the painter's studio. Courbet, and the generation of Impressionists who followed his lead, made the radical assertion that perhaps not the entire truth about reproducing the visual world had yet been discovered. They took their portable easels and the new technology of pre-mixed tube paints out into the field to look at the world directly without the blinders of tradition, and to draw and paint directly from nature. Novelists such as Honore de Balzac, Emile Zola, George Eliot, and Stephen Crane, in their own ways, followed the same avant-garde realistic path.

As discussed above in Chapter 7, the mimetic and parodic gesture of netprov is a way to draw from nature, to make fresh observations unencumbered by a mature art form's

conventional wisdom on how people talk and write, to see anew the shape of contemporary lives and the state of language in the mind.

Twitter's draconian 140-character limit is a prime example of how the technical limitations of Internet, social media and personal media formats serve, wittingly or unwittingly, as Oulipo-style constraints. YouTube's ten minute film limit for most users has spawned a ten-minute-film explosion. Facebook's automatic photo resizing has created a de-facto default for image sizes. Any of these standards, created by engineers for engineering and marketing purposes, once fictionalized becomes a new form for art.

Personal Media: The Art of Written Conversation

Grace, Wit & Charm attempts to mimic the rhythm and dynamics of real-time written exchanges in text messaging and social media. These quickly-written exchanges represent a new form of linguistic dialogue, somewhere between technologically slower written exchanges and spoken conversation. Conversation itself is a game. In the game of conversation, the rules are fluid and constantly negotiated. My own basic definition of a "real" conversation (as opposed to mere fact exchange or repetition of oft-told tales) is that all participants share the goal of creating new knowledge, by learning, insight or invention. It is a creative collaboration. All participants come out knowing something they didn't know previously. Antoinette LaFarge writes at length in her discussion of theatrical improvisation on the Internet of comic timing in MOO writing and the rhythms in what she calls "the quasi-oral arena of online theater." (LaFarge 1995)

In particular, *Grace, Wit & Charm* drew inspiration from the changes in orthography that have accompanied vernacular writing in personal media. Abbreviations, phonetic spelling, homophonic substitutions of letters and numbers for words —" I luv u" "I luv u 2"—emoticons and the misspellings of messages written in haste all found their way into the project. The consonances of this new orthography with the tradition of literary puns and portmanteau words such as those created by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, were

inspirations for me and for Mark Marino in creating the Tweet-by-Tweet style of *Grace, Wit & Charm*:

> @Neil_GWaC: My wrists are KILLING me today. 2many Smoothmoves! #gwandc

> @Sonny1SoBlue: Ah, wifey must be deploydmented again! RT @Neil_GWAC My wrists are KILLING me today. 2many Smoothmoves! #gwandc

> @Laura_GWaC: Seems like those wrists have been bothring you for a while @Neil_GWaC #gwandc

> @Neil_GWaC: Yeh, and the quacktor gave me tehese Canadian meds and Im sure they're plazebos. cant even swing the three-sided sword! #gwandc
> (Wittig, et al. 2011)

The Performance of Identity on the Web

How long does it take to realize a web site is fake? What if that web site is a blog, a blog say, like the many hundreds of thousands that exist, wherein a young person is growing and experimenting with new attitudes, a new personal style. What if that person, for example, hangs out in real life with people who all like country music, but on the blog is indulging a secret passion for heavy metal? More seriously, what if the blogger was born female but feels himself to be male and has not yet revealed this fact to friends and family, but is trying out this new, more authentic version of self on a pseudonymous blog? Friends and family in denial might call this blog a fraud and a fiction. All these bloggers themselves will likely further evolve in their tastes as time goes by and look back on their own various earlier incarnations as in some way incomplete compared to their current evolution.

All this is to say that even serial confessional texts that in every way are sincere and "real" non-fiction contain experimentation, mimicry, play and falsehood. If the writer is growing and evolving, they must. As web writers such as Sherry Turkle have been telling us for years, online identity in MUDS, MOOS chat rooms and games is a performance that interpenetrates, amplifies, and sometimes contradicts the performance of identity that we do in real life. Turkle comments:

> As a new social experience, MUDs pose many psychological questions: If a persona in a role-playing game drops defenses that the player in real life has been unable to abandon, what effect does this have? What if a persona enjoys success in some area (say, flirting) that the player has not been able to achieve? Slippages often occur in places where persona and self merge, where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self. (Turkle 1996)

We used to believe a person's identity was as unchanging as a book. Now we are beginning to see that it has always been as fluid as a website. Facebook's insistence on a single, verifiable identity is a desperate rear-guard action of the waning book-paradigm era.

Digital culture scholar Jill Walker Rettberg, writing about online photographic self-portraiture in the context of the reversal of the top-down flow of traditional mass media in *Mirrors and Shadows: Digital Aestheticisation of Oneself* writes:

> In an attempt to cling to the past, mass media try to fit in with this change by making everyday people the stars of the mass media. We have reality television, makeover television, contests like Idol and Survivor which all make miniature celebrities of people who fade quickly in and out of the limelight. The more powerful movement is on the internet, and it is controlled entirely by the everyday people themselves. These people write diaries, they publish photos, and most

importantly: they write themselves. They don't allow others to represent them. They are in charge of the presentation of their own lives. That is something the mass media have never encouraged. Capturing our mirror images and our shadows is an exploration of what it means to be a subject in an age where masses no longer exist.(Walker Rettberg 2005)

Walker Rettberg points out the way in which the performance of identity is an act that takes place in an adversarial environment, one in which other forces are eager to shape one's identity.

My web fiction *The Fall of the Site of Marsha*, (Wittig 1999) which shows three stages of progressive deterioration of a web 1.0 personal website is an example of a fictional performance of identity.

In creating *Marsha* I drew inspiration from the sheer naïve exuberance of vernacular home pages—the wild experimentation with typography, the jamming together of heterogeneous appropriated imagery, and the tendency to use the web as an intimate confessional, with early home page makers not quite realizing how public it was and how much of their story they were revealing. I was also, at the time, interested in the 19th century Romantic fascination with ruins and asked myself to imagine what a ruined web site would look like. (We now have seen plenty of ruined and abandoned web sites, but in those hopeful, forward-looking early days of the web it was an odd notion.)

The character Marsha is a fan of angels, and in particular a kind of angel called throne angels. I studied the many real angel websites of the time and positioned Marsha and her best friend Bits as new members to this angel website community. Marsha's site is, in part, a tribute to her late father, about whom she feels some ambivalence and guilt. She throws out a rhapsodic invitation for people to participate in her site and for the angels themselves to come and visit. The angels come, and they are not nice. In fact, the angels—or perhaps hackers/haters posing as angels—begin to bully her and vandalize her website in its second and third iterations, touching sore points about her father's death

and the loyalty of Bits. Careful readers will have noticed by the second of the three iterations of the site that Bits and Marsha's husband Mike are having an affair. By the third iteration of the site, the angels' harsh emendations to the site dominate, the images are dark and mangled, and Marsha's husband is announcing that Marsha has been institutionalized for mental illness.

Marsha's self-presentation of identity is constructed in several ways. Her writing reveals more about her than she realizes, using time-honored literary devices of the naïve narrator. But in addition to these traditional linguistic tricks, I used mimicry of the vernacular to show her character by the graphic design choices she made and the imagery she appropriated. She also includes a photo of herself high on the page. This ability to associate a face with an identity is a powerful communications tool.

By using a strategy of mimicry and parody and fictionalizing the vernacular in *Marsha* I was aiming to make the reader aware of not just the nascent conventions of self-presentation on the web, but also, by contrast, the profoundly invisible conventions of self-presentation in real life. An awareness of one's own strategies of self-presentation is a perfect example of what in psychology is called insight. By inviting the reader to see in Marsha what Marsha does not see about herself, the project also implicitly invites readers to apply the same process to themselves.

Mimcry on the Web

Mimcry and fictionizing takes place countless places in the margins of web culture. A beautiful and representative example of mimicry in the heart of a serious enterprise is the underground world of fake Amazon.com book reviews.

Amazon was early among web retailers to recognize the power of orchestrated word-of-mouth advertising and invested a lot of resources into creating systems for organizing and displaying user reviews of items for sale. Identified by screen names, these grassroots reviewers soon developed a community complete with hierarchies, alliances,

competitiveness and enmities. This is just the kind of situation that invites parody.

So, before long, readers of Amazon reviews could read this seemingly innocuous review of *Handbook of Meat Product Technology*: "[five stars] Tremendous. An admirably thorough guide to the tools of the production-line meat processing trade. The superb colour photographs particularly made it a perfect gift for my 15 year old daughter who is showing alarming signs of not becoming vegetarian." (Henry Raddick 2002) Early on in online retail giant Amazon's proto-crowdsourcing project of inviting users to review products, fictional Amazon reviews began to be posted. Fictional reviews usually are organized in two forms. In one, a single reviewer, such as Wayne Redhart http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/cdp/member-reviews/AZN3ZSQQU3WW5/ (Redhart 2008-2011), or Henry Raddick http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/AA9IP6AYACFK5 (Henry Raddick 2001-2011) reviews a wide variety of items. In the other, many reviewers contribute fictional reviews to a single product, real or invented, for example the David Hasselhoff series http://www.amazon.com/Very-Best-David-Hasselhoff/dp/B00005Q8UG/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1312989831&sr=8-2, and the reviews of Uranium Ore in Amazon's Industrial and Scientific category http://www.amazon.com/Images-SI-Inc-Uranium-Ore/dp/B000796XXM/ref=cm_cr_pr_product_top .

These "fake" or fictional Amazon reviews are a perfect example of how the vernacular, real-life pomposity of over-serious real Amazon reviewers initiates a playful moment of mimicry that produces parody and satire. The fictionizing impulse is found here in miniature.

Fictional Blogs and Fake Pedagogy

One of the first fictional blogs to gain recognition as such –despite early reactions that weren't sure if it was fake or not—was *She's a Flight Risk*. (v 2003) This blog diary of a self-described "international fugitive" isabella v. unrolled in real time and now is archived with an overview introduction http://www.aflightrisk.blogspot.com/ . **Lonelygirl15** http://www.lg15.com/ was a fictional video blog relating the trials and

tribulations of a heartbroken teenager. (Flinders and Beckett 2006) It drew hundreds of thousands of followers as a "real" blog, and then used the revelation of its fictionality as a marketing tactic. It has now grown to a transmedia micro-empire with connections to the television industry.

Masquerading as video instruction for Photoshop users, the miserable life of "Donnie" comes leaking out in passive/aggressive chunks in the hilarious series ***You Suck at Photoshop***, recorded with simple desktop capture software http://www.mydamnchannel.com/You_Suck_at_Photoshop/Season_1/YouSuckAtPhotoshop1DistortWarpandLayerEffects_1373.aspx . (Hitch and Bledsoe 2008) Imitating the profusion of amateur instructional videos covering activities from music to sports to software, *You Suck at Photoshop* sets as its goal to both legitimately teach one pro trick of the graphic design software Photoshop in each brief episode. Meanwhile, the teacher, Donnie, lets his personal life leak out in the examples he chooses (his ex-wife's car that he vandalizes in Photoshop) and in his conversations with a buddy who appears in chat on the desktop. Donnie is a prime representative of the principle of "too much information" discussed above.

Participation: Grassroots Photosharing Projects

In addition to the conversion of the form of real blogs other real confessional forms into fiction, the gesture of which maps clearly onto literary history, the Internet offers new examples, made possible by new technologies, that offer clues to netprov about how to gain participation from a wide group of unknown players.

Photosharing and videosharing aren't usually explicitly organized as a game, but given that there is a goal to amaze and amuse, they are game-like. Collaboration is used to create highly specific collections. Here are few examples of sites that continue to inspire wide participation.

Starting out with sharing photos the passive/aggressive notes in its title, **Passive/Aggressive Notes** http://www.passiveaggressivenotes.com/ has branched out to

showing photographs of handwritten public notices of all kinds. (K. Miller 2007) An aggregator of design, **FFFFOUND!** http://ffffound.com/ is a popular walk down Trend Street for cyber-flâneurs worldwide. **FAIL** http://failblog.org/collects "epic fail funny pictures and videos" of humanity at its most crestfallen. Fail appears to be getting progressively "monetized" with more and more advertising and possibly professional content creation. (Huh 2008)

Grassroots Collaborative Writing Projects

Certain aspects of fiction that were traditionally the purview of the single author are ideal for crowdsourcing. What literary criticism would call detail and observation are things that are perfect for collaborative collecting. The heterogeneity of life is best represented by heterogeneous writers. There now are hundreds of thousands of grassroots collaborative projects thriving on the Internet.

How to get more than photosharing from participants? A great example of a collaborative writing project is *Tweeting Too Hard* http://tweetingtoohard.com is "Where self important tweets get the recognition they deserve." For example:

> 1) "Just turned down the chance to do the keynote at an event to be held at MIT next year. Bummer! Sadly, just too much on (and it was unpaid)."
> 2) "I need another 5 white boards. My brilliance cannot be contained."
> 3) "Holy crap, I just saw my traffic. Are that many people looking at my humble little site? It's not even official yet." (Philips 2011)

Although it is possible to vote in the form of "back pats" (pure recognition) on this site, there are no formal prizes and voting is not required.

This is a touchstone example for me. What it has going for it is: the rules of the game are self-explanatory; just read any three contributions and you get the idea. There is feedback, in McGonigal's terms, both in the form of "back pats" and the unquantifiable,

conversational goal of knowing you have made a good joke in a joke-telling session.

Fictional Facebooking and Twitter Fiction

Social media have begun to be fictionized as well, both in sponsored, official ways, and in unsponsored, grassroots ways. Facebook's policy of insisting on real identities among its users and attempting to eliminate fake identities has always served as a challenge to individual fictionizers who have remained fairly successful in maintaining fictional profiles in the social network.

As a formalized project, in the summer of 2010 the online magazine *Slate* announced the serial publication of a young adult novel, ***My Darklyng***, in Facebook http://www.slate.com/id/2255954 . (Mechling 2010) The protagonist Natalie Pollock's page http://www.facebook.com/mydarklyng started things off, and Facebook pages and Twitter feeds of her friends followed.

Perhaps the most well-known example of social media fiction is Journalism professor Dan Sinker's Twitter project **@MayorEmanuel** http://twitter.com/#!/MayorEmanuel is an example of character-focused netprov satire based on a real-life person. Sinker pretended to be former Barak Obama aide Rahm Emanuel during his campaign for Mayor of Chicago and made the most of Emanuel's reputation for foul language. (Sinker 2011) Sinker has gone on to sign a contract with prestigious publisher Scribner's for a book based on his Tweets. Sinker's project I meets nearly the whole checklist of what I would consider netprov, aside from the lack of collaboration. Sinker's use of recognizably literary, "bookish" vocabulary and sentence structure in his Tweets is a way of insisting on the literary status of his project.

> @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 (Sinker 2011)

The strategy of importing literary language into a new medium is fundamentally a different one from the more naturalistic mimicry of vernacular. I note in myself a personal aesthetic wherein I tend to try to avoid using established literary language in new media. To me it seems like a way of forcing or blackmailing the readers into granting a legacy literary status to works. I prefer to search for new beauty in the new vernacular forms. But I acknowledge this as a personal preference and not an objective criticism.

Among the most intriguing projects in Twitter so far, to me, tend to share with the fake Rahm Emanuel that they are mostly character-based projects that can operate with or without strong narratives. Two examples demonstrate this well.

@YourAuntDiane is an invented persona designed to satirize New Age elders. It is topical (e.g. the solstice) and contains small narrative sequences ("Hosting an adult Slip-n-Slide tonight") but is mostly a series of one-line jokes. (Pseudonymous 2010)

@bronxzooscobra purported to be Tweets from a cobra that had escaped the Bronx Zoo in New York. Within the first few hours the cobra's ghost writer had helped the project leap from mimicry to satire.

@BronxZoosCobra Bronx Zoo's Cobra

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 Bronx Zoo's Cobra

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 Bronx Zoo's Cobra
What does it take to get a cab in this city?! It's cause I'm not white isn't it.
28 Mar (BronxZoosCobra 2011)

These projects are fun and charming small projects that completely celebrate the core impulse of mimicry that all netprov and netprov-like projects share.

Episodic and Incomplete Reading

One of the most powerful changes wrought by the new technologies and the new cultural practices they engender is the emergence of a new and largely subconscious life-rhythm for the millions of people who communicate regularly in complex combinations of Internet, social media and personal media. A quick indicator of this subconscious rhythm is the thought experiment: what would it be like for you to have no phone or Internet for 24 hours? 48 hours? one week? The bent head looking intently at the object cupped in the palm is *the* signature gesture of our era.

Reading and writing in these new ways now take place in dozens of tiny moments intermixed with other activities throughout the day. Rather than always spending blocks of time watching a play or reading a book, people now follow narratives – real and fictional – in micro-moments woven into other behaviors. Asynchronous communication has its own rhythms. In communications relating to intimate relationships and close friendships, there may be a sense of completeness – wanting to be sure to read every message in an exchange so as not to miss important communication. But from acquaintanceships on outwards to the types of more emotionally distant communication we call "news" or "entertainment" there is not a feeling of necessity to see *every* update, to view *every* episode. Readers often seek "just enough" to catch the gist of a story.

The existence of archived DVD and streaming collections of broadcast programming has radically changed the time experience of mass media for example. It no longer matters if one "misses" a broadcast. In fact, new habits are developing, such as catching up on a whole season of a TV show in a weekend viewing marathon. There is now an assumption that all digital communications will always be available and therefore a "complete" viewing can be indefinitely postponed until some future time. The actual ephemerality, as of 2011, of Twitter for example, comes as a surprise to many users.

Netprov is designed to thrive in such a world of episodic and incomplete reading.

What Netprov Can Learn From the Internet, Social Media and Personal Media

In the real of **people** there is a new skill and rhetoric of written socializing developing, the creation and maintenance of written relationships, which netprov can use to "draw from life." Self-explanatory, bottom-up, grassroots collaborative creative writing projects such as *Tweet Too Hard* can provide guidance for creating enticements for participation. We are in the midst of an explosion of writing, photography, graphic design and filmmaking. The technologies required to participate in these fields, once prohibitively expensive outside of a professional setting are now available on almost any personal computer. The principle that AOL stumbled into by adding, as almost an afterthought, personal and communal communications to its services—only to find out that interpersonal connections was what most interested its users—continues today. The writing, photography, design and filmmaking that is taking place all around us is overwhelmingly interpersonal and documentary, not fictional. This means that, instead of simply dragging older, existing art forms—created in older media—into the new media we, as creators, have the chance to freshly fictionalize vernacular forms and create a fresh new art.

As for **form**, these new media are seeing an explosion of new technical means and emergent cultural practices ripe for use and parody. Parliamentary rules for collaborative

writing and image sharing are being negotiated constantly, effectively educating a potential netprov audience in modes of use. The nature of the networked media economy tends to make companies invent new, proprietary software along with each new products or service. Google does not use Amazon's search algorithm, and vice versa. Twitter's graphic design is distinct from Google Plus's. This means that there is a wealth of new forms waiting to be fictionalized. The inventiveness of the commercial world blazes a trail for the formal mimicry of the artistic world.

With few canonized **fiction** traditions yet, fiction on the Internet, in social media and in personal media is still framed as it was in the early days of the novel, hovering uneasily between art form and hoax. The very fact that so much "serious" writing and image-making is taking place that has not yet been fictionalized is exciting. Taking all this into account, the means are at hand for a golden age of networked arts such as netprov.

8_Netprov: Projects and Characteristics

Examination of its five tributary fields has shown us the main inspirations for netprov. Now, even though the delineation is somewhat arbitrary, we come to works I think of as netprov proper.

Netprov Projects

Early Netprov: IN.S.OMNIA

In the wake of the Novel of Seattle project, in the autumn of 1983, the group of Invisibles began to write on one of the earliest literary electronic bulletin boards, IN.S.OMNIA (Invisible Seattle's Omnia). In 1994's *Invisible Rendezvous* I recounted how, very rapidly, we discovered many of enduring modes of electronic fictional play: multiple screen names, fake "real selves", tactics of timing and pacing, the heady pleasure of instant publication and the courage of anonymity. We were among the first to learn that in asynchronous collaborative writing we could enjoy many of the same pleasures Del Close and his partners had enjoyed in live, synchronous theatrical improv.

Literary Netprov: The Unknown

The collaborative hypertext novel *The Unknown* by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, & Dirk Stratton, with Frank Marquardt is a netprov project in that it was created collaboratively in real time, with real-life events serving as the models for extravagant fictionalizations.

> I pull up in David Geffen's borrowed Jeep to find William sitting on the ledge with Putzy and Rolpho, whom he introduces as "Bungie Jumping Professionals." They've all got their shirts off. Putzy and Rolpho are two well-built guys with tattoos of grinning skeletons and snakes, black and white and red and green all

over, "tribal," they call it. William has a tattoo, too, I note, of Gertrude Stein's head, freshly cut into the flesh over his left shoulder blade.

"That's new," says I.

"I got drunk in Tiajuana," says William, "with some lesbian bikers. You like?"

I nod my head, though I'm not crazy about the tattoo. Stein's cool and all, but her head on your shoulder? It says, "Yes we have no bananas today," underneath the head. Which wasn't an original Stein line, anyway. But I wasn't going to bring that up. Not now. (Rettberg et al. 1998)

The project's process operated in two basic modes. There was a 'same-room' some or all of the writers gathered in the same place, often a hotel room or bar, writing in short bursts and then reading chunks aloud or silently and then responding. Then there was an online mode, where the writers, living in different cities, would post chunks on the Internet and read and respond at a distance. This strong and immediate feedback was part of the pleasure of composing the piece, and the excitement carries through to the reader.

In this project part of the pleasure is the interplay between the real-life lives of the writers and the competing fictional accounts of each other that formed the basis of the play. There is a game at work here, but it is a game in the mode of the social games I discuss below and which were defined explicitly in the improv theater theory of Del Close. The game of the Unknown might be called something like: a grandiosity contest, or, I romanticize your life better than you can romanticize mine.

Week-Long Netprov: Friday's Big Meeting

Into the web era, my 1999 web fiction *Friday's Big Meeting* was graphically designed to look like the record of five days of live chat in the proprietary chatroom of a small, fictional, failing web design company. (Wittig 2000) The reader sees not only public chat, but the private, behind-the-scenes chat in personal messages supposedly only visible to individual interlocutors. The reader is plunged into not only the employees' doubts about their entrepreneur-leader, but a vigorous online romance between one employee at

the Chicago office and another at the St. Louis office. The story begins with the company's only client delivering an ultimatum that he wants to see an acceptable presentation by Friday or he will pull his account, effectively killing the company. At the same time as employees debate and struggle toward this deadline the online romance leads up to the couple's first meeting in the flesh, which will also happen in the early hours of Friday.

Mostly pre-written but partly improvised before each midnight release, *Friday's Big Meeting* was published, day-by-day over the course of five weekdays. I sent out e-mails to alert friends to the daily installments but I estimated that most readers would encounter the piece some time after the "performance" and read it in a single session. Even so, just the idea that readers could follow each episode as it came out encouraged me to create the episodes as cliff-hangers, driving reader interest into the next episode.

Month-Long Netprov: Blue Company

My novel in e-mail *Blue Company* (Wittig 2002) was performed twice, in 2001 and 2002, by sending out an e-mail a day for a month to subscribers. Pre-plotted and 70% pre-written, this was the first project I had done that consciously included daily improvised elements, including current events.

Blue Company consists of e-mails from a marketing guy who has gotten a really bad job transfer. He's been transferred to Italy, which is great, but he's been transferred to the 14th century, which is uncomfortable and dangerous. Nominally addressed to a woman he is romantically interested whom he met just before his travel, but also written with a nod to a broader audience he knows she will share the messages with, the e-mails wind out of the alps down to the plain of Milan as the narrator rides with a company of mercenaries that turn out to be working for nefarious 21st century interests.

The daily e-mail rhythm of *Blue Company* inspired Scott Rettberg's wonderful companion piece *Kind of Blue*, in which he adopts and repurposes the characters, framing

the time travel as mental illness and the nefariousness in the context of contemporary Chicago. (Rettberg 2002) Rettberg and I co-wrote the last message in a way that felt clearly in the improv tradition of Chicago's Del Close.

Ongoing, Crowdsourced Netprov: Los Wikiless Timespedia

Mark Marino's online *Bunk Magazine* responded to the Los Angeles Times' creation of a wiki by with a participatory satire called *Los Wikiless Timespedia* that posits the LA Times' committing to publish solely as a Wiki.

> By Ole Opossum
>
> Thursday, March 13, 2008, 2:02 PM :
>
> The Raccoon who writes imaginaryyear.com recently admitted to tampering with "The Nudity on Film" entry in the Wikipedia.
>
> "I'm no expert on nudity in film or anything," explains the Raccoon. And yet, the Raccoon edited the entry.
>
> Apparently the removal involved:
>
>> see, for instance, the stuff about "a brief shot up Jessica Rabbit's dress" down at the bottom of the page for a representative example of the stuff I've been carving away from it.
>
> It was unclear whether the Raccoon had insider information on the filming of that particular shot or simply did not conder and "upshot" as nudity.
>
> The Raccoon announced its insatiable appetite for editing, writing, "I more-or-less know how to organize and fix bad writing, which makes Wikipedia an occasionally-irresistable pasttime for me."
>
> Nothing will stop this Raccon. As it declares, "My work on it is not complete."
>
> The billion-plus editors of Wikipedia could not be reached for comment. (Marino et al. 2008)

Los Wikiless Timespedia uses facsimile graphics to comment on the declining fortunes of traditional newspaper publishing and the rise of networked media. Marino has told me in conversation that, for him, part of the aesthetic of this project was the gradual decline in collaboration and participation and the slow takeover of the site by automated advertising spam-bots. Marino has written extensively on the use of bots as characters in fictions. Bots are always essentially frauds or fictions anyway, to the extent that they are intended to make readers believe a real person is responsible for the texts. Marino opens the door to a wide range of possible automated fictions that could assist netprovs or function as automated netprovs.

The Ballad of WorkStudy Seth

From March 6th to May 6th 2009 Mark Marino explored multiple modes of netprov in a series of Twitter messages now displayed under the title *The Ballad of WorkStudy Seth.* (Marino 2009) Starting with the self-introduction of a work study 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 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 mewent 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. 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* (Young 2009) 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! (Marino 2009)

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 where 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.

Netprov: Chicago Soul Exchange

My own first attempt to piece together all the elements of the as-yet unnamed form of netprov was 2010's *Chicago Soul Exchange*, (currently unavailable online) done as a practical project as part of my work on a Master's degree in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen, Norway.

In the project plan for *Chicago Soul Exchange*, I described the basic conceit of the project this way:

> Chicago Soul Exchange (CSE) is a weeklong, partly scripted, partly improvised collaborative web fiction. It is based on the claim 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. We posit a secondary market in past lives that sells quality past lives (which turn out to be difficult to harvest) to the highest bidder in online auctions. "Chicago Soul Exchange --- Yes, you can have a better past! At competitive prices!" Our story

follows a sweet, feisty, small-time entrepreneur as she defends her business against the encroachment of powerful, dangerous, international cartels and attacks from beyond the grave. Unfolding in real time, this "psychological comedy" takes place on the e-commerce website in the form of the auctions and the surrounding discussion forums and social media updates. The main roles are performed/written by a team of writers and designers according to a plot arc focused enough to keep the action fast, furious (and funny) and open enough to invite individual creativity. Reader/users can also participate in the project, bidding on souls, being souls, and taking sides in the raging debates. (Wittig 2010)

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. This was the first project where I organized the people consciously into inner and outer circles, laying the groundwork for my current thinking about inner-circle collaboration and outer-circle participation. *Chicago Soul Exchange* was a trial run for the larger and more ambitious *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

The original plot structure plan of Chicago Soul Exchange involved three levels of plot:

Ostensible Plot
The site will function like an e-commerce auction site. The communications will pretend to be structured around three auctions happening during the week and attendant commentary.

Major Plot
Past Life Maven battles with multinational corporate forces for the survival of her small business and, ultimately, for her own survival. She and her business are rescued, with unintended side effects, by Breguswidth, a dead soul.

Minor Plot

SpiritualEssence falls in love with a past life she has purchased, Swidhelm. Swidhelm's wife Breguswidth appears out of nowhere to contest the romance. (Wittig 2010)

The plots were modified somewhat by improvisation during the course of the week-long performance, but the themes treated by the piece stayed intact. The list of themes in the planning documents of *Chicago Soul Exchange* included:

- Discovering one's past life has become a therapeutic and recreational pursuit for a certain group of middle-class, middle-aged Americans and is often associated with New-Agey personality-cult quasi-religions and charlatanry.
- Reflection of the current economic recession
- Exploration of how individuals construct personal identity through cultural and economic "shopping"
- Exploration of bad behavior on social networks
- Mainstream leitmotif: Plucky, wacky, small-business entrepreneur vs. big corporations
- Underlying leitmotif: psychological health from self-acceptance in "as is" condition
- American religiosity
- CSE as an odd mixture of:
    - Art Dealer
    - Adoption Agency
    - Dating/Matchmaking Websites
    - Stock Market
- "What's missing in your life?"
- Real Issue: what makes a life valuable? (Wittig 2010)

From *Chicago Soul Exchange* I learned many things, including how to divide a netprov into narrative "beats," and the importance of team-building in-person collaborative

activities among the inner circle collaborators. I got strong feedback that one week was not long enough to allow collaborators and participants to get into the swing of the project.

A Netprov Manifesto: Rules of the Game

With a sense of netprov's inspirations and possibilities we return now to the definition and characteristics of netprov from Chapter 2. In expanded form, this list of characteristics was the guide for the creation of *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

Netprov = networked improv narrative.

1. Netprov creates stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

> These three qualities form a minimum definition of the form. Within the fiction texts appear to be written in real time; in fact they can be pre-written and scheduled for later release. The pacing and timing of texts 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 relatively similar time zones.

2. Netprov uses multiple media simultaneously.

> Netprov takes full advantage of the literary potential for rhetorical and graphic design mimicry-parody-satire of the forms it occupies.

3. Netprov collaborative and incorporates participatory contributions from readers.

> The collaboration of the inner circle is modeled on theatrical improv. The participation of the outer circle of readers is modeled on networked role-playing games, and on fan participation in mass media fictional "worlds."

4. Netprov is experienced as a performance as it is published; it is read later as a

literary archive.

During the performance the goal is to be powerful theater. When the archive is created, the goal is to make powerful literature.

5. During the performance, netprov projects incorporate breaking news.

Netprov, in the spirit of the Surrealists and other avant gardists, aims to trouble barriers between fiction and reality. Netprov aims to shorten the lag-time of satire.

6. Netprov projects use actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create.

A new creative role based on ancient models, the writer/actor is promising possibility for the digital age.

7. Netprov is usually parodic and satirical.

In the playful progression from mimicry to parody to satire, netprov offers a playground for instantiating healing insight for society.

8. Some netprov projects require writer/actors and readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities.

In the spirit of idealistic Alternate Reality Games, netprov can use digital media to coordinate and create physical play.

9. Netprov is designed for episodic and incomplete reading.

Netprov is open to being mixed and remixed by its players. It corresponds to the way people are already using digital communications. 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 whether they read only a few messages or 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.
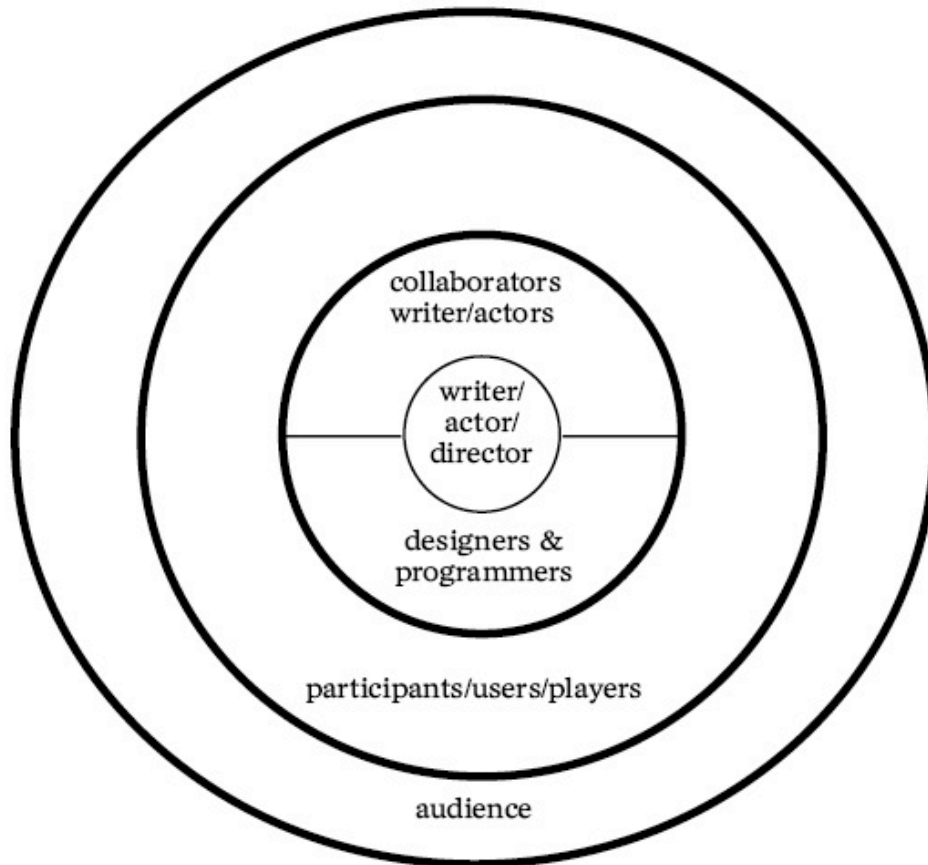
Structure of Netprov: the inner circle behaves like a show; the outer circles behave like a game.

Potential for Netprov: Satirizing Psychology, Media and Workplace

Above we saw Del Close's description of the in-the-moment joy of improv. His love of the phenomenon of group mind is described in a chapter that bears the instructive title "One Mind, Many Bodies." Close's theory of "group mind" offers much to netprov practictioners—particularly those who come from literary background with its traditionally solitary, often competitive work process—an interesting counterpoint to the model of the solitary romantic genius. Close puts forward the seeds of both an psychology of collaboration (in which the joy of collaborative play is its own "intrinsic reward" in McGonigal's terms) and an ethics of collaboration (downplay individual egos

in favor of the troupe and the performance as a whole). (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993)

The dramatic power of netprov in a project like *Grace, Wit & Charm* is this possibility of combining the satirical subversion of the normal restraints of psychology, with the subversion of hegemonic, market-driven communications media, *and* with subversion of the whole neo-liberal capitalist work ethic and workplace mythos which is so strongly supported by the "satisfying work" of online games.

Avant-Gardism

This is a good moment at which both to look at games in the context of the avant-garde, and to fully disclose my own avant-gardism. I have a formalist aesthetic belief that the fiction of a given time is best created in the communications media of that time (i.e. a 19th century-style novel written about the 21st century necessarily lacks certain insights). This is a kind of formal, although perhaps not technological, determinism.

My use of netprov comes, in part from my fascination, as a lover of narrative literature, with the evolution from the 19th century novelist's artistic strategy of 'bringing the entire world into the book' to a new strategy that might be called 'sending the fiction out into the world' or 'creating a creative feedback loop with the world.'

Netprov is a model that rejects the oversimplified Hollywood idea of 'story' that has gotten increasingly formulaic and divorced from reality, a model goes to direct observation for inspiration, a model that insists on the possibility of users being able to transform their real lives with creativity and insight. Netprov can draw simultaneously from the Realist and Surrealist avant-garde traditions. *Blue Company/Kind of Blue* and *Chicago Soul Exchange* are both naturalistic and supernatural.

Part Two: Practical Project

9_The People, Form and Fiction of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Based on the inspirations and experiences recounted above in Part 1, in September 2010 I began developing a practical project – a work of netprov that was given its premier performance May 14th through 29th, 2011. This was *Grace, Wit & Charm* http://gracewitandcharm.com. (Links to the project are provided in the Appendix.)

Genesis of the Fiction

The fictional premise of a new netprov for 2011 took shape around a few nodes. Off the top, I wanted it to be bigger and more ambitious than anything I'd done before. If 2010's *Chicago Soul Exchange* was intended to be "novella sized," *Grace, Wit & Charm* in 2011 was intended to have the breadth, depth and heft of a novel.

Then, two project concepts that had been floating around my notebooks since the early 2000s re-entered the picture. The first of these was the idea of a fictional, bad little Chicago improv theater company whose internecine, behind-the-scenes fighting could be witnessed on their (supposedly confidential) blog. The lasting intrigue of this project (working title: *The Struggling Theater Company of Chicago*) was the transmedia notion of an audience at a real-life theatrical show who had read the ongoing backstage blog and would be painfully and deliciously aware of the subtextual soap opera underlying the superficially dysfunctional show. The point of the show would not be the improv, but witnessing the actors' lives melt down. I had created real-time online characters before,

but here was a vision of being able to buy tickets to see them in the flesh. The second proto-project bore the working title *Cyrano, Inc.* and concerned a behind-the-scenes workplace drama at a company that provided discreet and confidential ghostwriting for clients embroiled in online flirtations and online romances. The ghostwriters would fall in love with clients and/or each other in a set of variations on Rostand's archetypal *Cyrano de Bergerac* while allowing me to satirize the burgeoning world of online romance.

The catalyzing node was a moment of pure mimicry. I was watching over the shoulder of my step-son as he played *World of Warcraft*. I began to prance about the room imitating the bizarre, bouncing lope of a running *WoW* avatar and said "We should all move like this in real life!" As I stopped the stylized movements and slid back into my normal gait I got a vision of a room full of behind-the-scenes workers in a motion-capture studio secretly working to make certain, elite avatars move in a more naturalistic way – at first matching the "*WoW* bounce," then taking over the avatar and smoothing out the movements. In this room, beleaguered workers lounged around gossiping, texting and napping until the alarm sounded and they had to leap up to swordfight a dragon or dance a romantic waltz.

The Fundamental Premise of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

The original basic idea of *Grace, Wit & Charm* was of a software company that provided customers just this service of creating naturalistic movements for their online avatars with a software program called "Grace." The company, SmoothMooves Inc., had added two other pieces of software to their line: "Wit," for customers who wanted to be funny on line but had no sense of humor, and "Charm" for the romantically impaired (essentially a reworking of the *Cyrano, Inc.* concept).

The only problem, the fiction went, was that the SmoothMooves programmers weren't very good. They couldn't get their programs to function correctly so, as a stop-gap measure, they had hired real human beings, dubbed "agents," and hidden them around the world in secret "call centers" with sophisticated motion capture labs to service customer

demand. *Grace, Wit & Charm* was to be a behind-the-scenes drama of the workers in the Duluth, Minnesota SmoothMooves call center, showcasing their work lives but concentrating on their personal lives. Without wanting to completely echo the anti-technology, man vs. machine mythos of John Henry, the American folk-hero miner who dies racing a steam drill with his mighty hammer, there was something appealing to me about placing a fiction on the border between what machines can do and what human beings can do.

But a conceptual problem arose: if the call centers were secret, how would the audience of my netprov ever find out about them? Was I putting myself, as a netprov promoter, into the tricky position of publicizing something secret?

The fiction morphed. I dropped the notion of the dysfunctional software as being an unnecessary complication and conceived of a SmoothMooves Inc. that was proud of their character enhancement agents—so proud, in fact, that they were ready to invite the whole world behind the scenes.

"Peek Behind the Curtain"

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

> *In just two weeks, you'll get a chance to peek behind the curtain of the* underground 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 gracewitandcharm.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." (Wittig 2011)

Synopsis of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

What readers found on the fictional company 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 slave driver 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 other's 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, and 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.

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 GRACE, WIT & CHARM 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.

Figure: The Top Page of the *Grace, Wit & Charm* Website

Grace, Wit & Charm **According to the Characteristics of Netprov**

1. Netprov creates stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

Project Duration

Scott Rettberg had counseled me after the one-week performance of *Chicago Soul Exchange* that one week had seemed too short and had not given participants time to get engaged. Therefore I planned *Grace, Wit & Charm's* May 2011 performance to last two weeks, including three weekends, from Saturday, May 14th through Sunday, May 29th. Based on the availability of the Teatro Zuccone in Duluth, Minnesota two nights of live performance were scheduled for Tuesday May 17th and Tuesday May 24th, 7:00-8:00 p.m., price: free.

I determined that the performance would include texts from the 5 characters during their daily 12-hour shift, from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., seven days a week. Each day began with the a shift-change from Bob the Boss that set daily goals. The shift was set to end at 8:00 p.m. so that the live performances in the theater would purport to be the last hour of the characters' long work day.

People: The Inner Circle Troupe; Roles

Original Story, Lead Writer/Actor/Director: Rob Wittig (BOB THE BOSS, et al.)

Lead Writer: Mark Marino (NEIL, et al.)

Writer/Actors: Jamie Harvie (NEIL), Gary Kruchowski (SONNY), Cathy Podeszwa (DEB), Shannon Szymkowiak (LAURA)

Writer, Director/Stage Manager for Live Performances: Jean Sramek

Graphic Design: Rob Wittig, Laura LaBounty

Web Programming and Design, Live Streaming: David Roberts

Digital Art, Stage Art Direction: Joellyn Rock

Live Streaming Camera: Chris Julin

Writer, Co-Director for Live Performances: Margi Preus

Writers: Chris Julin, Catherine Winter, Scott Rettberg, Christa Schulz, Paul Cabarga and Tom Grothus

Illustrators: Eric Stykel, Matt Olin

House Manager, Teatro Zuccone: Crystal Pelke

Lighting and Theater Tech: Todd Higgins

Publicity Coach: Sherry Richert Belul

Video: Bruce Ojard

Project Coordination and Communication Tools

A password-protected **Inner Circle Blog** was created for inner circle collaborators on the project and preliminary exercises were held there in the run-up to the project. I recorded a short video to explain the project to newcomers, I shared logistical information about the project, designers shared sketches-in-progress and the troupe played collaborative writing games to begin to experiment with the improvisations to dome.

Co-Tweet was used for live and timed-release writing. Co-Tweet is Twitter text management system that allows pre-writing and timed release of Twitter messages and makes it easy to switch among different Twitter account/identities.

I wrote a **Beat Sheet** that contained the fifteen overlapping sub plots, each divided into three parts (beginning, middle, end) and spread over three days, for the two weeks of the project. The Beat Sheet became the outline of the pre-writing Google Docs in which the pre-written Tweets took shape. The Beat Sheet was also shown on a **calendar**.

Google Docs documents, each covering several days of the performance, were used for writing collaborative scripts containing actual pre-written Twitter messages; the pre-written messages were then copied and pasted into Co-Tweet; these documents allowed Mark Marino and me to communicate efficiently about our pre-writing.

Skype and phone conversations with Mark Marino in Los Angeles and others were used for strategic and tactical discussions.

I put together **Character Sheets** for the four actors that provided the basics of their characters.

Weekly Happy Hour Meetings on Fridays at Sarah's Table Restaurant in Duluth were the rallying point for the project inner circle. These were used to discuss project logistics, themes and subplots. Most importantly, the writer/actors Gary Kruchowski (SONNY), and Cathy Podeszwa (DEB) used this time to workshop their parts by getting into character and improvising long conversations in which they invented and shared backstory. I sometimes prompted them with backstory I had created or subplot information as a catalyst, and sometimes I chimed in as BOB THE BOSS. This created both a bond and a body of (pretend) shared experience that provided content for both the written and live parts of the project.

Stage Director Jean Sramek had advised me that they way to get the best writer/actors for the project was to guarantee minimal rehearsal time, so before the live shows we had only **two rehearsals**. During these rehearsals, the easy-going, long-form character development improvisations that Gary Kruchowski (SONNY) and Cathy Podeszwa (DEB) had begun at the weekly Happy Hour evolved to include Jamie Harvie (NEIL) and Shannon Szymkowiak (LAURA). Except for Shannon, all the writer/actors are experienced amateur or semi-professional actors. Shannon's years of experience in professional live improv theater in Minneapolis enabled her to be a subtle leader on stage, in effect an on-stage director, during the live performances.

The writer/actors developed a tradition of **pre-show improv** in the green room of Teatro Zuccone that built on the Happy Hours and the rehearsals. An hour before curtain they dropped into character once and for all and became, in effect, *Grace, Wit & Charm* workers preparing to work their shift. One of my favorite memories of the entire project

is the moment when I came into the green room in search of a prop and listened for several minutes to a conversation that was so naturalistic that I assumed it was real, only to finally discover – with a huge laugh – that the troupe was all in character. The beginning of the live shows was a "soft start," with the characters simply walking on stage as though coming back from their break, already deep in conversation. Before the second show, the writer/actors had built up such a head of steam in the green room that director/stage manager Jean Sramek didn't have to give them a signal to start the show. They simply sighed, looked at their watches and trudged dutifully "back to work."

Style Trials

I set as a challenge to myself and Mark Marino the development of a recognizable style for *Grace, Wit & Charm* text so that it would have a recognizable literary and orthographic flavor even if quoted out of context. What we developed was a combination of willful mis-spellings, puns and portmanteau words, inspired in part by James Joyce's style in *Finnegans Wake*. In a series of preliminary Google Docs documents, Mark and I performed a series of style trials that set the tone for the writing of the project.

Improvised in Real Time

Although it is somewhat difficult to estimate, I would say that this performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm* was 60% pre-written in Google Docs a day or more before publication, and 40% written within hours or minutes of publication.

2. Netprov uses multiple media simultaneously.

Grace, Wit & Charm reached its audience via coordinated, transmedia use of thirteen media modes:

    1) e-mail promotion using automated publicity system Constant Contact,

    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 used as a discussion forum 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) an archival project website, including streaming archival video of the performances.

3. Netprov is collaborative and incorporates participatory contributions from readers.

Collaboration is discussed in detail above under characteristic #1.

Grace, Wit & Charm was participatory in the following ways: psuedonymous readers contributed problems and solutions to the problem and solution blog on the project website; audience members in the live theater audience at Teatro Zuccone and audience members watching the live web stream contributed problems via Twitter, some of which found improv solutions on stage during the performance.

4. Netprov is experienced as a performance as it is published; it is read later as a literary archive.

I did as much as I could to draw participants and audience to the project before and during the performance. I used my real Twitter account, @Netprov_RobWit to make public, "behind-the-scenes" announcements building up to the opening day of the fictional Open House and during the performance. I used the same Twitter hashtag

(#GWandC) for these promotional messages as the characters were using for the fiction; fiction and a meta-level of self-aware reality co-existed in the same hashtag. Friends and acquaintances wrote me in e-mail asking for technical assistance in following and participating in the project. Mark Marino spent time in the four character Twitter accounts, having the characters follow other Twitterers as a publicity strategy (if I follow you, you'll follow me). He also cross-posted Tweets to others who might have an interest in the project, in particular during the E-Poetry conference, held May 18-21 in Buffalo New York. Mark also organized a group to watch the first live performance streaming from the Buffalo conference and people participated from there, Tweeting problems to be solved by the writer/actors on stage.

During the summer I ripped video of the live performances to get it ready for an online archive. In October I re-organized the website and re-made it into a self-explanatory web archive. Among the changes from the live version of the website are: I created an explanatory top page, I had the Twitter text re-designed and put into ascending order, and I posted full videos of the two live performances,.

5. During the performance, netprov projects incorporate breaking news.

The Royal wedding of England's Kate and William inspired a subplot, *Sonny Saves a Honeymoon*. A concurrent news story about the acceptance by the German medical establishment of placebo therapy as real therapy found it's way into the sub-plot *White Lie Therapy*.

6. Netprov projects use actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create.

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

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table. The mug shot images of the characters on the website and in the Twitter feeds are key to the impact of the project.

7. Netprov is usually 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.. Content topics are discussed fully below in Chapter 11.

8. Some netprov projects require writer/actors and readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities.

The two live, webstreamed performances at Teatro Zuccone experimented with this effect of the characters "coming to life."

9. Netprov is designed for episodic and incomplete reading.

With thirteen parallel modes of communication, each reader was able to remix the piece at will. A "complete" reading of *Grace, Wit & Charm* is impossible, given simultaneous communication modes. Sometimes writer/actors would forget the #GWandC hashtag, meaning that certain messages were only visible in their individual Twitter feeds, adding to the incompleteness.

10_Issues and Theory in the Fiction of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

My two years of intense research as a master student in the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Bergen during the development of *Grace, Wit & Charm* allowed me to explore a number of theoretical ideas that became a part of my inspiration for the project. While these ideas were taking shape as a netprov fiction on one hand, they were also forming into the outline of a theoretical/critical essay on the other.

Netprov offers the opportunity to explore issues of modern life. This is why I chose to situate *Grace, Wit & Charm* in the call center of a fictitious "online character enhancement" company. It allowed me, the collaborators, and participants, to investigate, through imaginative play, substantial contemporary issues such as: disembodiment and technology, mediated long-distance relationships, and the evolution of networked labor.

As our overworked heroes Laura, Neil, Deb and Sonny struggled to stay afloat in their working and personal lives under the scrutiny of the Open House audience, they were called upon to improvise solutions to customers' online problems ('make my avatar sexy,' or 'weasel a day off work for me') and to their own problems ('Neil's wife in Afghanistan is cheating on him' or 'Deb's son is addicted to a video game').

In this chapter I will first share the fifteen sub-plots that wove through the two weeks' performance. Then I will outline the theoretical/critical ideas that inspired the sub-plots.

The Fifteen Interweaving Subplots of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

The project's themes were carried by the overlapping subplots or narrative units of the project. Each subplot was divided into at least three "beats" and spanned three days. Subplots that occurred on the two nights of live performance were subdivided into more beats for the stage production.

In addition to these subplots the characters responded daily to problems submitted by readers.

Figure: The overlapping subplots of *Grace, Wit & CharM* for the two-week performance in May 2011, in Calendar form.

1) Why Us?
SONNY leads THE TEAM in bemoaning having been chosen as the poster-children for the online Open House; in doing so they provide basic exposition characters and setting.

2) Avatar as Voodoo Doll Urban Myth
DEB stumbles upon an online urban myth that onscreen avatars are voodoo dolls: whenever you play a video game, somewhere a real person is in pain.
DEB constructs pseudo-scientific experiments on the Voodoo Avatar principle for the team to perform with clients, finally giving a client a heart attack during the live show.

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3) Laura's Bad Boyfriend

LAURA's long-distance bad boyfriend is back; Laura exults; the team groans and rolls eyes and predicts doom. He disappoints her yet again. During the live show, LAURA and SONNY has a big pow-wow on Skype with LAURA'S BAD BOYFRIEND KOYS. LAURA explains that she and SONNY are such a good Charm team that she wants SONNY to consult on her real life relationship. She breaks up again the next day.

4) I'm a Long-Distance Loser

NEIL's private-defense-contractor-bodyguard-to-royalty wife in Afghanistan is cheating on him, and THE TEAM members inadvertently discover hard proof. At first they try to keep NEIL in the dark. NEIL finally accepts the truth and does a soulful soliloquy "I'm a Long Distance Loser"; LAURA tries to comfort him but he's oblivious.

5) Sonny Saves a Honeymoon

SONNY is called in to rescue a honeymoon; Deb believes it is the royal honeymoon . . . or at least "a" royal honeymoon. (The royal wedding of England's William and Kate occurred around this time) SONNY deftly resolves the marital problems; the team admires.

6) Take Your Damn Meds!

DEB jumps at the chance to take on a Health Care Challenge: home tele-nursing for shut ins. DEB is exasperated at non-compliant patients; SONNY and others rush in to mitigate her tirades. DEB resists, then goes along with the team as the team works out a tag-team method for dealing with home tele-nursing; DEB goes behind everyone's back to negotiate a large Health Care contract with Virtu-Kare

7) Social Engineering

NEIL is called in to help group of social media friends that has an awkwardness; he hacks TwitFace "just a touch" to rearrange some friendship networks. NEIL's hacking as set into motion a socially cataclysmic series of events threatening to ruin dozens of real life

relationships; the whole team consults to help him out. NEIL solves the TwitFace social problem by inventing an imaginary person, whom he is now doomed to play forever

8) First Tele-Surgery

DEB's business relationship with Virtu-Kare leads to a trial contract for a couple of tele-surgeries to come in the next few days; SONNY is morally appalled. DEB charges ahead with plans for the surgery; recruits SONNY as the "hands" by flattering his Radio Controlled Model Snowmobile vanity. DEB leads the first tele-surgery, with DEB doing visuals and SONNY doing hands, is a great success**!**

9) The Double Surgery

SONNY accepts another surgery, a carpal tunnel job, at first reluctantly and then with more enthusiasm. NEIL catches wind of the carpal tunnel surgery scheduled for Tuesday; he needs the same surgery but can't afford it, since SmoothMoovesTM doesn't offer health care. SONNY and DEB perform carpal tunnel surgery on a client while LAURA attempts to mimic the same operation on NEIL, onstage, with their hands in a pillowcase.

10) Laura's High School Revenge

LAURA bemoans her suffering at the hands of her old high school crowd, who still bully her; the team sympathizes. LAURA is assisted by the team as the team realizes that one of their clients bullied LAURA in high school; the team plots virtual revenge

11) White Lie Therapy

NEIL uneasily finds himself doing online medical consulting and de-facto psychotherapy. Placebo therapy only works if the patient believes an authoritative doctor who claims the treatment is legitimate. NEIL's truth-telling hesitation undermines the process. He loses the confidence of a patient. DEB coaches NEIL on how to be an authoritative placebo doc.

12) Choosing the Prize

SONNY leads a discussion: Our team is now in the lead for the company-wide incentive prize; they can choose between a vacation in Ocean Shores Mississippi (hardest hit by the BP oil spill) or a retirement savings plan; it must be a consensus, everyone must agree; Sonny argues for the retirement plan; DEB agrees. SONNY despairs as NEIL and LAURA rhapsodize over the vacation; DEB and SONNY argue for the retirement savings. Deb and Sonny both join the vacation; yayyy, deficit spending! Yayyy living for the now!

13) Deb's Kids Are Our Future

DEB's son is a video game addict; DEB and the team plan an intervention. DEB panics as the intervention goes awry; "Mom you're such a hypocrite! Look what you do at work!" A battle between the generations about net life. DEB is rescued as SONNY and Neil devise a way to pry the controller from Deb's son's hands.

14) Laura and Neil Elope

NEIL has been clueless . . . but, yes, it's been building up forever; everyone can see it but NEIL and LAURA; NEIL and LAURA are in luuuv; LAURA seeks SONNY's subtle advice; NEIL seeks DEB's blunt pragmatic advice. LAURA's hopes abound. With prodding from their co-workers, NEIL and LAURA finally have their talk; in Twitter of course; they feel the same way about each other! Yay! They immediately have to text and TwitFace all their friends as they try to hold hands; they lay plans to elope. LAURA has been hoping NEIL has been clueless . . . but, yes, it's been building up forever; everyone can see it but Neil and Laura; Neil and Laura are in luuuv; Laura seeks Sonny's subtle advice; Neil seeks Deb's blunt pragmatic advice

15) Last Words

SONNY leads as Virtu-Kare begins to assign the team hospice, end-of-life challenges; they spend the last few moments with clients DEB is called into one of the most dreaded of all challenges: texting/chatting to someone in his/her deathbed on behalf of a squeamish relative. THE TEAM joins to say goodbye to a client who was a heavy web

user; the team joins to say goodbye to the audience; the last words of the project and the last words to the client are the same; the value of a life lived partially virtually SONNY delivers a Last Words statement that both serves the needs of the client and also serves as a summation of the project.

Re-enacting Mind and Body in the Digital World, or "Here I Am Now, and Other Fictions"

In the projects I have done, including the netprovs *Chicago Soul Exchange* and *Grace, Wit & Charm*, the dialectical interplay between theoretical/critical thinking and creative writing is very important. I often find specific ideas for fictional characters and situations developing out of critical thinking, and then when I analyze elements I developed seemingly purely for tactical, fictional purposes I find clues for re-thinking theory.

The theoretical/critical line of thought outlined below is a continuation of certain ideas in my 1994 book *Invisible Rendezvous*, particularly those summed up in this passage:

> The lesson of network communities such as IN.S.OMNIA is that they become extensions of—not alternatives to—our everyday communities. They allow us to live in two places at once (minimum: two worlds). They force us to realize that we behave differently under new constraints, become different people at different times (minimum: two selves). They show that—through combinations of media, memory, and imagination—geographic zones are already constantly interpenetrating. (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994)

The basic thrust of my thinking is that, time and again, when theorists formulate a model of new sociological and cultural behavior they contrast it with an implicit or explicit model of the behavior of the past, and that these models of the past are often deeply

flawed—they are often romanticized and idealized. I find that the virtual environment of networked digital media brings to light a series of flawed idealizations of the older, analog world. As I noted in *Invisible Rendezvous*, having a new, digital viewpoint gives us a place to stand to observe the analog world from the outside, and perhaps see it clearly for the first time.

I ended *Invisible Rendezvous* with the call "Writers, readers, users! Meet us at the invisible rendezvous! "You," as the map says, "are here." (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994)

I gave this series of reflections summarized here the playful working title: "Here I am Now, and Other Fictions." In investigating some common idealizations of the pre-digital world I posited as *fictional* every term in the phrase "Here I am Now." In the digital environment: What is "here?" Who am "I?" What does it mean to "be?" When is "now?"

The Idealization of Embodiment or "The Cyborg Has the Flu"

Grace, Wit & Charm deals with complex contemporary relationships among mind, body and machine. In their fictional workplace, *Grace Wit & Charm's* character enhancement agents often leap up in their motion-capture suits to embody and impersonate clients who need help moving their avatars in plausible ways. This gesture focuses attention on the odd disembodiment of gamers and players in virtual environments by making visible the motions of a real human body that maps onto the virtual movements of an unseen avatar. N. Katherine Hayles's 1999 *How We Became Posthuman, Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Hayles 1999) is a powerful and persuasive exploration of the subject of this kind of disembodiment. I read it carefully in preparation for *Grace, Wit & Charm*. In it Hayles tells

> . . . three interrelated stories. The first centers on how *information lost its body*,
> that is, how it came to be conceptualized as an entity separate from the material

forms in which it is thought to be embedded. The second story concerns how *the cyborg was created as a technological artifact and cultural icon* in the years following World War II. The third, deeply implicated with the first two, is the unfolding story of how a historically specific construction called *the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman*. (Hayles 1999)

Hayles's case is built from two elements. First, she does marvelous and meticulous history around the development of the field of cybernetics which underlies contemporary computing technology. She focuses in particular on cybernetics guru Norbert Wiener, noting, among other things, his personal discomfort with his own body. Second, she does insightful criticism of canonical works of science fiction which explore various formulations of the human-machine hybrid, the cyborg.

Simultaneously, I was reading Harvard historian of science Anne Harrington's *The Cure Within; A History of Mind-Body Medicine*. (Harrington 2008) Harrington's examines six cultural narratives of mind-body medicine, which seemed to clash powerfully with many of Hayles's assertions about relationships between mind and body in both the analog and digital eras. Hayles and Harrington both present cogent cases for certain traditional structures of mind/body relationships in the analog, or *real*, world. They both cite cases that are familiar to us, but do not map well onto each other. Hayles draws principally from science fiction, Harrington draws from science fact. I was particularly interested in Harrington's cases since I don't find references to them in the cultural theory usually associated with electronic literature.

Harrington's first story is The Power of Suggestion, what she calls the skeptical or debunking narrative. This traces the development of hypnosis by Mesmer and others initially as a secular, scientific explanation of the widespread medical theory of demonic possession and the official practice of exorcism. Harrington shows how hypnosis cures, despite their initial success, were then, in turn attacked and debunked as 'mere suggestion,' and vilified in popular culture in characters such as the arch-hypnotist Svengali from George du Maurier's novel *Trilby*.

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Harrington's second story, The Body That Speaks, she calls the detective narrative. Made most famous by Freud, this is the assertion that the body, by displaying symptoms of disease for which there is no organic cause, is sending a coded message that can be deciphered and interpreted for healing.

The third of Harrington's stories is The Power of Positive Thinking, which she calls the secular miracle narrative. Based on French efforts to find a scientific rationale for the cures at the shrine of Lourdes and populist American Christianity and spectacles of faith healing, this narrative transforms the placebo effect—cures with no observable material cause—from being considered a fraud based on mere suggestion to a therapy gradually gaining status within the medical community by the end of the 20th century.

Harrington's fourth story, Broken by Modern Life, she calls a narrative of lament. This is the history of the concept of stress, which initially was a replacement for the previous diagnoses of neurasthenia (common in the late 19th century, then utterly abandoned), shell-shock in WWI, and battle fatigue in WWII. Harrington shows how stress, an idea developed and championed by two laboratory scientists, not clinicians, has always been as much a cultural idea as a medical one. Stress is, historically, at its foundation a critique of industrialized urban society and its effect on the hearts of males.

Harrington's fifth story is Healing Ties, the narrative of nostalgia. It is essentially a response to the notion of stress, and asserts that the lack of supportive family and friends as in the communities of earlier times, decreases our ability to cope with disease.

Her sixth story is Eastward Journeys, the narrative of exoticism. In this narrative the medical cultures of Asia are proposed as too-long-ignored solutions to health problems, and are morally contrasted favorably with a Western medical culture that wandered from the truth due to its dogmatic adherence to an inflexible scientific method.

Both books are brilliant and convincing portrayals of contemporary mind/body/machine culture. Hayles tells three stories of mind and body; Harrington tells six. I understand and recognize the validity of both Hayles' and Harrington's stories – and at the same time the stories are *utterly incompatible.*

My use, in *Grace, Wit & Charm*, of both avatar/cyborg situations and medical situations (the sub-theme of an imagined method for long-distance digital medical treatment) was a way of creating a kind of collision in the laboratory between the two books – a diffractive reading. Diffractive reading is a process that has been described by Donna Haraway and others, and was introduced to me by University of Bergen's Hilde Corneliusson. The spirit of Haraway hovers over the collision between Hayles and Harrington, and it is in the exploratory spirit of her *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991) that I created fictional situations such as the long-distance carpal tunnel surgery that was imitated, live on stage, by Laura performing an in-person carpal tunnel surgery on by imitating and following along with the long-distance one being performed by Sonny and Deb.

Figure: ***Grace, Wit & Charm*** **character enhancement agents perform a tele-surgery on a distant carpal tunnel patient, from the second live show, May 24 2011**

The Idealization of Identity or "In Defense of Pretension"

Secondly, I investigated the Idealization of Identity (which bore its own working title in my mind: "In Defense of Pretension"), looking at how identity in the analog world is idealized and stable self-consistency is both posited and required. This continued the examination of multiple selves I began in my book *Invisible Rendezvous* (Wittig and IN.S.OMNIA 1994) in light of both new technologies and new findings in neuroscience. I explored how "playing at voices" or trying on new identities —- often seen socially as "pretentious" is an important part of both personal and cultural evolution.

> simmy says:
>
> May 17, 2011 at 8:48 am
>
> CHARM PROBLEM: AFFAIR WITH MYSELF
>
> Dear GW&C, I just found out that I am having an affair with myself. The bigger problem, though, is that I have known about it for two years now, but I have been lying to myself this whole time. How should I confront myself? Set up a meeting at the local eCafe and surprise myself? Or have my own affair with my alter ego to get back at me? Any help would be most appreciated. Help! Thanks, Simmy.
>
> Pseudonymous participant in *Grace, Wit & Charm* (Wittig, et al. 2011)

The realm of human investigation I find most exciting in 2011 is neuroscience and the revelations it has produced in the last seven years or so due to functional magnetic resonance imagery (fMRI) which now allows us to have, essentially, films of the brain in motion. Many of the subjective phenomena of multiple selves I, and others, have written about now can be seen.

Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA School of Medicine describes the neurobiology of multiple selves like this:

By now you may be asking, what exactly are these many "states" or "selves" that each of us have? In brain terms, a state is composed of a cluster of neural firing patterns that embed within them certain behaviors, a feeling tone, and access to particular memories. A state of mind makes the brain work more efficiently, tying together relevant (and sometimes widely separated) functions with a "neural glue" that links each of them in the moment. If you play tennis, for example, each time you put on your shorts and shoes, pick up your racket, and head for the court, your brain is actively creating a 'tennis-playing state of mind.' (Siegel 2010)

The implications of this research on theorizing the liberal subject and for thinking about mimicry-based fiction such as netprov are enormous and exciting.

I connect this new neuroscience with a cultural/critical Defense of Pretension I have been working on separately for several years. To summarize: Goethe goes to Rome, wears a toga, and pretends to be an ancient Roman poet – and transforms European literature, opening the door to the Romantic era. William Morris pretends to be a medieval European folk artist, Isadora Duncan pretends to be an ancient Greek dancer, the Surrealists pretend to be politicians, the Invisibles of Invisible Seattle pretend to be Surrealists —- the tradition of pretension is deep and wide. What is the Renaissance, after all, but hipster Italians pretending to be ancient Romans?

The Renaissance example shows all the elements always present in this gesture of cultural pretension. 1) The past is misunderstood, either willfully or through ignorance. Only those elements of the past that seem a tonic to present ills are selected. 2) A blend is made of past and present with superficial borrowings from the past (clothing, hairstyle, design, discretionary lifestyle) overlaid onto contemporary science and technology. When he needed to get somewhere, William Morris rode the train. 3) From this unnatural coupling of misunderstood past and a critique of the present springs a new cultural formation, oddly appropriate to its time. In Gr*ace, Wit & Charm* the fictional company's basic business proposition—let us impersonate you so that you appear to be better than

you are when you are online—is an enactment of this new cultural formation.

The Idealization of Immediacy

Third, I looked at the **Idealization of Immediacy** through a re-reading of Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*. (Bolter and Grusin 1999) Bolter and Grusin's assertion that there is an "insatiable desire for immediacy" seemed to contrast with the cultural rise of asynchronous communication and a consideration of how fast is fast enough.

> High'nRollin says:
>
> May 24, 2011 at 3:04 pm
>
> GRACE PROBLEM: POKER FACED My problem is I'm in a high stakes online poker tournament right now, I'mve been drinking some brewskies to keep me relaxed; maybe to many brewskes; but so my avatar face is "faced" and giving a obvious "read" on every hand. I'm loosing my shitr! I need one of you sit at the table for me.
>
> Pseudonymous participant in *Grace, Wit & Charm* (Wittig, et al. 2011)

I will read Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation,* looking closely and critically at their assertion that digital culture has "an apparently insatiable desire for immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 1999). They use the example that "the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop." (Bolter and Grusin 1999) I disagree strongly. I believe what is wanted—what has always been wanted, even in the analog era —is to be on one's couch *and simultaneously* seeing the race car or the mountaintop.

I maintain that holistic immediacy is an errant quest. I will assert that in actual, lived, unmediated experience people are constantly experiencing "instant replays" (memories, regrets) and "flash forwards" (worries, predictions). And I will maintain that what people want is always to be in at least two places at once.

Grace, Wit & Charm made this visible in moments where the characters were solving client problems while simultaneously fully inhabiting their workplace, which included snarky side comments unheard by the clients and tableaux where characters were in the motion capture grid impersonating a client but also working out a problem from their own personal lives at the same time.

The Idealization of Immersion

> Gervase says:
>
> May 15, 2011 at 7:25 pm
>
> GRACE PROBLEM: NEED TO BE SAME THERE AS HERE
>
> I'm in hopes that your team can provide me some advice on a topic that
>
> has hitherto plagued my romantic life. For medical reasons that for
>
> the exigencies of space I cannot here elaborate upon, I need to wear a
>
> rather substantial surgical truss. Far from embarrassed by it, I would
>
> like my on-screen avatar to sport one as well, but heretofore I have
>
> not been able to find a way to suitably garb my doppelganger. I would
>
> be most pleased and grateful for any assistance you could provide in
>
> this matter. Best wishes, Gervase
>
> (Pseudonymous participant in *Grace, Wit & Charm* (Wittig, et al. 2011)

Fourth, I looked at the idealization of immersion, in which I also found myself in conflict with Bolter and Grusin and other media theorists, particularly game design theorists, who hold immersion high as a holy grail for projects. As above, I contend that the cultural urge to be "in two places at once" outweighs the urge to immersion. The passage above about the client who needs a virtual truss runs counter to the principle that immersion involves an escape from reality.

The Idealization of Narrative

Fifth, I looked at the Idealization of Narrative and how 19th century ideas about plot and character, kept on life-support in Hollywood, create a definition of narrative that is belied by other, natively digital narrative forms that operate via dialogue and tableau.

Brimley, son of Brimston says:

May 21, 2011 at 10:21 am

GRACE PROBLEM: UNDERSIZED AVATAR DANCE MOVES

My avatar is at least 3 feet shorter than hers is. We go to Second Life dance getting caught underfoot. I need a way of dancing with her that is cool. Help!

LAURA says:

May 21, 2011 at 10:30 am

GRACE SOLUTION: UNDERSIZED AVATAR DANCE MOVES

Brimley you've come to the right place. We're gonna fit your avatar out with a proprietary Grace, Wit & CharmTM jetpack and have you revolving around your online girlfriend like Mars rotates around Venus! . . . I'll even take the controls and make sure you hover close enough to grab a kiss before the admiring crowds on the dancefloor.

Pseudonymous participant and writer/actor in *Grace, Wit & Charm* (Wittig, et al. 2011)

Critic Joe Tabbi, in conversation, questions the assumption that traditional "story" and "character," in their limited definition in the 19th century novel, will migrate to digital media. Gaylen Strawson's essay "Against Narrativity" (Strawson 2004) as well as parts of Steven Moore's *The Novel, An Alternative History* (Moore 2010) both support Tabbi's contention. As Tabbi points out, earlier novels, from the 17th and 18th centuries, did not need plot and character in the 19th century sense, and there is no requirement that literature of the future have them.

I take the position that a short-sighted definition of the literary based solely and wholly on the 19th century novel might exclude creative writing projects based on vernacular-style creative competitions. I will show examples from other periods of literary history to show that there is, at any time, always more than one literature – that in fact there are always at least two—and that *Grace, Wit & Charm*, is part of a long and deep literary tradition despite its support in new technology. In addition to including description, dialogue and plot elements familiar from literature and theater, *Grace, Wit & Charm* mimicked and modeled a system based more around tableaux (static dispositions of character and setting) that more closely resembles the static states of websites and the meandering chit-chat of social media in which conventional narrative cannot be found.

Reinventing Work, Love and Health Care

The key social issues that were targets of the satire of *Grace, Wit & Charm*: Re-Inventing Work, Love and Health Care.

Reinventing Work

> Sat May 14 14:47:32
>
> **@Deb_GWaC** @GWandC Bob, these pictures of us on the Open House Website are terrible! http://cot.ag/kpMZb8 U didn't tell us what they were for! #GWandC
>
> Sat May 14 15:51:34
>
> **@Sonny1SoBlue** @GWandC Yeah, Bob, the pictures make us look like we've been working 12 hr shifts, 7 days a week since November. Oh yeah. We have. #GWandC (Wittig, et al. 2011)

Grace, Wit & Charm deals with the de-materialization of labor, the broad social migration to digital jobs, and in particular the situation of the Midwest American "rust belt" in which Duluth, Minnesota is located, which includes the social changes from hand work to mind work and retraining ex-industrial workers.

Reinventing Love

Mon May 23 18:20:05

@Laura_GWaC Oh, heavho help me, guys. I Miss Koys!!!! When he's sweet he's soo sweet! I TwitFaced him and I'm waiting to see if he answers #GWandC

Mon May 23 20:50:06

@Neil_GWaC @Laura, I just don't think Koys is good for you. Look at you. You've been krying half the afternoon! #GWandC (Wittig, et al. 2011)

Grace, Wit & Charm continues a theme in my netprov projects of the rise of long-distance relationships mediated by network technology.

Reinventing Health Care

Sat May 28 18:50:01

@GWandC We are falling behind Shreevepoorpt. I'm signing us up for some VirtuKare hospice work. I think this will help us win! #GWandC

Sat May 28 22:25:

 @Sonny1SoBlue Hopsice work? Being with dying people?! Srsly? I thought we were about helping people viratully kill people! What happynd to GW&C? #GWandC

Sat May 28 22:26:

 @GWandC Thanks for volunteering, Sonny! I'll send the next couple of hospice problems your way. #GWandC

Sat May 28 22:27:

 @GWandC Sonny, you gotta speed up your VirtuKare hospice solution. We're losing credit$. Wrap it up! #GWandC

Sun May 29 00:00:24

@Sonny1SoBlue Creeminy Jeezmas, BOB! This gentleman is dying here. He needs some company. I can't rush this!! #GWandC (Wittig, et al. 2011)

Grace, Wit & Charm deals with new technologies of medicine, the narratives of mind/body medicine analyzed by Anne Harrington and the contemporary American health care and health cost crisis.

Figure: LAURA, left (Shannon Szymkowiak) begins to perform live, onstage carpal-tunnel-surgery-in-a-bag on NEIL, second from left (Jamie Harvie) in imitation of DEB and SONNY's tele-surgery.

11_Results of the 2011 Debut Performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Objective Results

How does one evaluate the results of a netprov project? One could examine it statistically. According to statistics tracked by Google Analytics, in the period from May 14th through May 30th, the run of the performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm*, 237 absolute unique visitors came to the project's gracewitandcharm.com website. Between them these visitors produced 448 visits, averaged 5.33 page views per visit and spent an average 6.49 minutes on the site per visit. Approximately 35 people came to each live performance. Between 15 and 30 viewers per show followed at least part of the performance on the live web stream.

One also could trace buzz about the project in social media. The *Grace, Wit & Charm* Facebook page got 52 "likes." The official Twitter mouthpiece of the project, the Twitter identity @GWaC, garnered 40 followers. The Twitter hashtag #GWandC, which was the locus of the Twitter portion of the fiction, fell silent within days of the end of the performance on May 29th.

One could even look for notices in traditional press. The *Duluth News Tribune* listed the live performances of *Grace, Wit & Charm* in their "Best Bets for the Coming Week" on May 12, 2011. (http://mobile.duluthnewstribune.com/event/article/id/198798/) (Lawler 2011) The live performances received a positive review in Duluth's *Reader Weekly*.

The most productive evaluation at this early stage in the life of an artform, however, is qualititative. I have, once again, organized my thinking according to the nine characteristics of netprov and I have paired each of the reflections with notes "for future projects."

Subjective Results: The Results of *Grace, Wit & Charm* According to the Characteristics of Netprov

1. Netprov creates stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

Duration

The two-week duration seemed both long and short. It was long in the sense that being responsible for 12 hours of written performance every day for 16 straight days, as well as producing two unique nights of live theater, took a great deal of energy and was somewhat daunting. It was short in the sense that, just about the time readers were beginning to understand and empathize with the characters, the project was over.

For future projects: The optimum duration for netprov is an important issue that merits further exploration and experimentation. I tend to think that a long-duration or indefectibly ongoing project would have a better chance of gaining a larger audience by referral than short-term projects. The time commitment required of writer/actors would be intense for such a project however, probably amounting to a full-time job. I have listed in a separate section at the end of this chapter several alternative futures for *Grace, Wit & Charm* and other netprov projects that include different durations.

People: Roles

The project made helped me understand two new roles that I had not anticipated. First was the role of **writer/actor**. I did not foresee the marvelous extent to which the four Duluth writer/actors wound up truly adopting and "becoming" their characters during the performance period. This prompted the additional research that uncovered the long Commedia Dell'Arte and North American improv writer/actor traditions. Even Mark Marino who wrote the character Neil without being the public face of Neil, was inspired to record and post a masked Zumba video on Neil's behalf. The second discovery of a new role was Jane McGonigal's idea of a **participation architect**. While I had done, or

tried to do, similar functions in past projects and Mark Marino and I did as much as we could on *Grace, Wit & Charm*, the notion of a separate person devoted only to eliciting and sustaining participation is a powerful one.

For future projects: Expand the pre-project time for workshopping and improving characters among writer/actors and foster their sense of ownership of their characters. Honor the writer/actor as a unique role. Employ a participation architect to manage the participation of outer-circle participants.

Project Coordination and Communication Tools
The **Inner Circle Blog** worked fairly well as an internal communication device. **Co-Tweet** was a good way to organize the timing and posting of Tweets, except for occasional human-error mistakes in which Tweets meant for later release were published too early, out of sequence. The **Beat Sheet** turned out to be an excellent means for coordinating sub-plots and outlining the writing of complete texts. In practice not all of the sub-plots were treated with an equal amount of text. Some became complex scenes that played out at length, others wound up being quick exchanges, almost 'one-line jokes.' One sub-plot, "Laura's High School Revenge" was cut entirely in favor of other subplots already playing out. Fifteen sub-plots for sixteen days of performance may have been too many. **Google Docs** worked adequately as a detailed drafting space for text. The **Character Sheets** could have been much more detailed while still allowing for development by the writer/actors; these turned out to be a more important piece of the preparation than I had anticipated. The **Weekly Happy Hour Meetings**, the **rehearsals** and the **pre-show improv** were unplanned discoveries of the process and turned out to be quite important. As for the 60/40 percentage of pre-written to improvised material my feeling during the performance was that I wished that more had been pre-written so that the other writer/actors and I could have more fun playing with the improvised material.

I was very happy with the pun-larded, mis-spelling style that developed in the project. To me it seemed to succeed in its goal of giving a flavor to *Grace, Wit & Charm* and packing the maximum meaning into 140 characters or less.

For future projects: Coordinate the use of an inner circle blog, character sheets, beat sheets and meetings into a more explicitly workshop-like, rehearsal-like 'game before the game' with the goal of character development and plot theme exploration. The sense will be that the inner circle fiction will be already up and running before the project is made public. This pre-performance workshop period can be used to do more pre writing. For a future two-week project there should be first a focused preliminary two-week workshop period.

2. Netprov uses multiple media simultaneously.

The use of a blog discussion forum as the place where outer circle participants could submit problems for the *Grace, Wit & Charm* team of characters to solve was difficult to use and was not a naturalistic use of vernacular forms. It did not elicit a large number of problems to solve. The choice to use a blog discussion forum was made because of the high cost and time that would have been necessary to program a more user-friendly and conceptually self-explanatory system.

The use of Twitter to carry the main narrative had the result that a working familiarity with Twitter conventions and Twitter culture (the 140-character limit, reverse chronology in Twitter listings, etc.) was necessary for readers to follow the fiction. This Twitter knowledge turned out to be highly age-specific among the Duluth audience; younger people tended to be able to follow the story and older people could not. As a creator of and participator in avant-garde literature projects for decades, I have never seen an audience that differed as widely in their ability to comprehend the basic conceits of a project as did the audience for *Grace, Wit & Charm*. One end of the scale were literate and intelligent folks who had absolutely no idea what an MMO, an avatar, or a motion capture suit are nor the faintest notion of Twitter discourse. For them, the basic premise of *Grace, Wit & Charm* was literally incomprehensible. At the other end of the scale were folks who live and breathe Twitter and networked games for whom the project was too basic and doing too much exposition. As a writer/actor my own relative lack of familiarity with Twitter made me occasionally doubt my aesthetic judgments. Several of

the writer/actors coached me about the Twitter-verse, but I still clung to the listed version of the Tweets provided by Twapperkeeper as a more familiar, literary-style text. The success of the Dan Sinker's fake Rahm Emanuel project – a single-character, non-interactive format—makes me wonder if five characters and a complex fictional frame are too ambitious for Twitter at this point. I tried to mitigate the foreignness of Twitter in its native form by including a listing of all the current Tweets on the website, but even so the graphic design difficulty was anecdotally described as discouraging by some readers.

For future projects: Use graphic design and programming strategically to make text sequences accessible for audiences unfamiliar with some of the technical transmedia modalities. Choose transsmedia modalities according to target audiences. Aim to have the complete story visible in some archival, older technology during performance for readers who don't know how to follow the transmedia version.

3. Netprov is collaborative and incorporates participatory contributions from readers.

The fact that even some inner circle collaborators were unfamiliar with Twitter and the blog discussion forum formats inhibited their potential to collaborate fluidly. The number of outside participants was small. The project never generated a viral buzz to invite larger numbers of strangers to come and play with us. Though we made the invitation to potential outside participants as clearly as we could, it seems that it was fairly difficult for people to participate in writing problems and solutions. The basic premise of the fiction may have been too complicated. At the very least it required a working knowledge of the concept of online virtual environments and avatars which, like Twitter knowledge, tended to be age-specific. Without this familiarity, even members of the live audience had no way to understand the actions of the *Grace, Wit & Charm* agents in the motion capture grid. I realize in retrospect that I went about the planning in the way a person from the literary or theater side typically would. I thought in terms of what I would "show" an "audience." I was not thinking of exactly how participants would be invited and supported to come play with us. In addition, even the time span of two weeks, which

seemed sumptuous since it was double that of *Chicago Soul Exchange* the year before, might have been too short.

For future projects: Include a game-world-style participation architect, or at least participation architecture thinking in the project development process from the beginning. Simplify the fiction, or at least the participation portion, so that it is more easily explained. Once we get participants and readers to show up, then we can make it richer and deeper. Projects could be planned with a longer ramp-up period to initiate participants into the fictional world and let them practice the mechanics of participation in small, easy, high-positive-feedback creative games. Then once a particpant group was up and running the deeper, more complex fiction could begin. It is intriguing to think of a project that would start with something simple, in the manner of @BronxZoosCobra, then as that thin narrative line built a following, suddenly a whole world with multiple characters and complex plots and beautiful websites (all painstakingly prepared in advance) would be revealed. This could give participants the feeling of stumbling into a world almost by accident.

4. Netprov is experienced as a performance as it is published; it is read later as a literary archive.

The two weeks were exhilarating. Mark Marino and I would converse by phone every couple of days to compare notes and lay plans for sections we were to write. My own experience of the live theater performances was intense. It was gratifying to hear lots of laughter from the audience. I was in such a bizarre, tunnel vision zone trying to keep my eye on the clock, DJ-select the next beat from the beat sheet and the incoming Problems, stay tuned in to the actors, end beats when they were dragging, not interrupt the actors before they reached what they were developing in improv, that I don't have any real sense of what it was like for the audience, in person, or watching on the stream. I had Margi Preus (experienced comedy writer/director) behind me whispering when to chime in with the next problem, which she did about five times during the night, which was good backup for me.

During the two weeks I found myself sometimes 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.

For future projects: Arrange an outside observer—a built-in literary critic, you might say—to be an audience advocate and give notes like a theater director's notes during the pre-project workshop period and the performance.

5. During the performance, netprov projects incorporate breaking news.

The fictional concept of *Grace, Wit & Charm* didn't intrinsically lend itself to much more current events coverage than we did. It was a Great Recession tale in general.

For future projects: Appoint a social-media-savvy collaborator to look for ways to cross-publicize a netprov project in progress with current trending topics as a way to get a new audience.

6. Netprov projects use actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create.

The ongoing roleplay of the writer/actors as discussed above is a powerful creative force. This could be extended to outer circle participants.

For future projects: Find ways, like in ARGs, for outer circle participants to contribute text, videos and live performance to netprov projects.

7. Netprov is usually parodic and satirical.

The initial fictional idea that the *Grace, Wit & Charm* call centers were secret lingered into the project long enough to create a bit of conceptual confusion which added complexity to an already complex premise.

For future projects: Simplify the basic fictional premise. Find ways to better invite participants into the satirical mode, they way *Tweet Too Hard* does.

8. Some netprov projects require writer/actors and readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities.

I discussed with the *Grace, Wit & Charm* troupe the notion of using GPS mapping to track Neil, Deb, Sonny and Laura even when they were not at work. Though we decided not to do this for this performance, it remains an intriguing possibility.

For future projects: Use ARG-like methods to engage real-life locative participation from outer-circle participants.

9. Netprov is designed for episodic and incomplete reading.

It is difficult to say if some audience members difficulty in following the project was due more to their unfamiliarity with the technology, as discussed above, or to their partial or out-of-sequence reading. Be that as it may, during the performance it occurred to me that perhaps netprov should 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. One morning remixing some Mark Marino drafts and composing new writing I found myself editing test to make Neil and the other characters say "my wife" "Neil's wife" "your wife" instead of "her" so that it was very plain who's being discussed. I definitely felt the urge to make sure readers knew the basics of what's going on. Because of the 140 character limit in Twitter, I realized

how important character names/Twitter names are for doing exposition and catching readers up on the story. The names can carry a lot of the holographic information needed. At one point I was thinking of screen names such as Nervous_Neil, Dr._Deb, and Lovely_Laura to go along with Sonny1SoBlue.

For future projects: Find ways to be holographic about the storytelling, constantly giving background and exposition for newcomers and partial readers.

Long Live *Grace, Wit & Charm!* Possible Futures of the Project

I wrote to the inner circle collaborators of *Grace, Wit & Charm* on the last evening of the two-week performance: *Grace, Wit & Charm* is dead. Long live *Grace, Wit and Charm!*

What I was experiencing as I wrote this was a perfect example of the tantalizing vertigo of new art forms. Had this been a once-and-for-all, one-time project and was it now over? Or was this perhaps just an out-of-town opening for some future, better-funded, better-publicized repeat performance? Or, alternately, had we simply had an exhilarating experience writing a literary text-to-be-read later?

For all that I have learned about netprov in the last two years, my answer to these questions is an enthusiastic: I don't know! I can imagine several possible futures for the project, all equally plausible and none mutually exclusive. All are worth pursuing.

A Real Company with a Real Purpose

The single most consistent anecdotal feedback I have received on *Grace, Wit & Charm* is some variant of: "This is a great idea! This should be a real company! I would use it." This is an option that should be considered, daunting though it may appear. It would require substantial capital investment, hiring of a technical and creative staff comparable

to that of a game website. How could it be something that actually served a real-life purpose, such as providing comfort and company to shut-ins with *Grace, Wit & Charm*? It could become a parlor game, or a network of parlor games. Online teams could be formed among strangers. Teams could compete in a periodic tournament structure. "Winning" solutions could be anthologized for a broad public to read. It could be a goal to create and promote relationships among reader/players.

An Ongoing Subscription Game

Grace, Wit & Charm could be promoted as a collaborative creative game, wrapped as a deadpan parody of a company. This too would require capital investment and a game industry technical staff and a creative staff.

Fixed-Duration Subscription or Free Game

This would require smaller staff and considerably less capital. Pending further research I would posit a six-week run as a placeholder for the duration, since that seems about the length one could reasonably expect a full creative commitment from both the inner circle and outer circle. At least one of Jane McGonigal's creative collaborative ARG's, *World Without Oil*, had a similar timeline for similar reasons. Interestingly there is no reason that a fixed-duration version of *Grace, Wit & Charm* couldn't be mounted many times, for example: annually.

Promote the Archive of a Single Performance

Most of the netprov projects I'm aware of follow this pattern. But the design and promotion of these archives is only in its infancy.

Perform Many Times like a Game or a Play

This is the usual theatrical model. It could easily be adopted by netprov.

Conclusion: Laughter, Insight, Empathy

What optimum characteristics could give netprov projects—collaborative and playful as they are—the appeal and depth to have the same cultural impact as the great novels of the

past? I've shown here how principles of mutually supportive collaboration drawn from theater and games can be leveraged to create parody-based fictional worlds in which **people** can play—both artist/insiders and outside participants. I've shown here how technical and graphic mimicry of vernacular models from mass media provides recognizable structures and helps explain these parodic games, and I've shown how ARGs provide numerous structural tips for organizing creative play and building new **forms**. I've also shown how character development, plotting examples, technologically self-aware narratives and an interplay between theory and creative writing drawn from literature and theater can bring the full depth and subtlety of the literary tradition to netprov's **fiction**. After examining all of these elements, a powerful triad emerges: laughter, insight and empathy.

A consistent theme in the projects I have studied here—and in *Grace, Wit & Charm*—is to have as a basic goal: the provocation of laughter. Netprov writer Mark Marino and I have shared in conversation our common proclivity for jumping to mimic, parody and satirize new media forms being used for truth telling as soon as they appear. To both of us these forms seem simply to be *begging* to be parodied. Viewed with a critical eye, this impulse might be evidence of the powerful impulse to mimic that Callois describes in children still surviving in adults. It might also spring from a social need to test the characteristics and limits—the strengths and weaknesses—of new social communication forms in a kind of trial by ridicule. How truthful *are* these new forms? What parts of inner truth do they reveal and which do they conceal? Perhaps this ridicule provides a social function of publically putting the new forms through their paces so that they are not taken too seriously. The laughter I seek, in particular, is the laughter of insight.

The Oxford English Dictionary Online gives, among its definitions of insight: "The fact of penetrating with the eyes of the understanding into the inner character or hidden nature of things; a glimpse or view beneath the surface; the faculty or power of thus seeing." (OED Online. "insight, n.1") "This is a good general starting place, but I am particularly interested in the further definition of insight used in the field of psychology:

"d. *Psychol.* In studies of behaviour and learning, the sudden perception of the solution to a problem or difficulty; applied to animals, giving an indication of their capacity for ideas and reasoning. In *Psychoanal.*, perception of one's mental condition. Also *attrib.* and in *Comb.*, as insight-giving, insight-learning, insight therapy." (OED Online. "insight, n.1")

Insight is also inner sight, looking within, seeing something that is right under our noses – in fact, behind our noses – something that has been with us all the time, something that has been "right there" but we never have seen it before. In psychological terms, insight is sudden understanding of he causes of one's disorder. Satire, I contend, is insight operating in a group of people. Satire is a way for society to understand the causes of its disorder. And that sudden understanding often causes laughter.

An African consultant on an educational publishing project I was working on once described how Anansi-the-spider stories were used in his family. Grandmothers and aunts were very observant about the behavior of the little kids. If one youngster was having problems sharing, sure enough, that night at story time, one of the elders would tell an Anansi story about sharing. Everyone in the intergenerational group would know who was being talked about, but the storytelling was never intended to shame or blame, just as a reminder and encouragement. I believe netprov can function in society in just this way, using the mediation of networked communication. Netprov has the potential to be not just creative entertainment but an art form that not only offers critical insight on society but also offers real opportunities for community building and new friendships, as shown by McGonigal's work on games.

From literature netprov can learn that narratives always offer a distorted mirror of the times, and the distortions are often intended to improve and heal. From theater such as the Commedia Dell'Arte netprov can learn that it is part of a tradition of purposeful, organized make-believe, going back to ancient Greece and beyond. It is a social insight, social psychology, social medicine.

Insightful laughter, however, can cut two ways. It can be either mean-spirited and derisory or it can be generous and empathic. From more recent, improv theater, netprov can learn the power of empathic comedy. Del Close was an empathy junkie. Del Close's writing points us toward agreement as a process and connections as a goal, including connections between people. He is eloquent and nearly spiritual in his descriptions of the pleasures of group mind.

Netprov as literature-based "show" offers the possibility of co-creation of insightful, healing satire that is as deep as the novels of the past. Netprov as "game" offers the possibility of new, empathic, real-life relationships based on creativity and contact and genuine understanding. In sum, I believe the *world* a netprov narrative can offer its participants is their own everyday world – transformed by laughter, insight and empathy.

Appendix: Web Archive of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Web Archive of Grace, Wit & Charm

http://gracewitandcharm.com

Twapperkeeper Archive of the Twitter portion of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

http://twapperkeeper.com/hashtag/GWandC?sm=&sd=&sy=&shh=00&smm=00&em=&ed=&ey=&ehh=00&emm=00&o=a&l=50000&from_user=&text=&lang=

Videos of the Two Live Performance Nights That Were a Part of *Grace, Wit & Charm*

Show 1

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 1 (Part 1 of 3) May 17, 2001

http://vimeo.com/26485377

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 1 (Part 2 of 3) May 17, 2001

http://vimeo.com/26176893

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 1 (Part 3 of 3) May 17, 2011

http://vimeo.com/26177139

Show 2

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 2 (Part 1 of 3) May 24, 2011

http://vimeo.com/26485532

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 2 (Part 2 of 3) May 24, 2011

http://vimeo.com/26177854

Grace, Wit & Charm Performance Night 2 (Part 3 of 3) May 24, 2011
http://vimeo.com/26178038

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