Netprov

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INTRODUCTION

Are you a creative person who loves cracking people up with just the right phrase in text messages and social media? Do you ever wish you had the time to write something bigger, something with the characters of a novel, the story line of a TV series—a substantial piece of fiction like the ones you enjoy?

What if there were a simple structure—a trellis—on which you and your friends could grow your own real literature in the flow of everyday life?

Well there is; it’s called netprov.

What is netprov?

Netprov is networked improv: networked, improvised literature. Netprov is collaborative fiction-making in available media. Netprov is role-playing in writing and images. Netprov is storytelling in real time. Netprov is a great game for students and friends. Netprov is an emerging art form of the digital age.

And netprov is fun. When your dog’s social media account replies to another dog’s account, that is netprov. When you comment with a facetious “blessed” to a friend’s hilarious humble brag, that is netprov. When you contribute to the astonishing, rich fan culture of fantasy characters, drama, and backstory surrounding the seemingly simple COVID-era baseball simulator “Blaseball,” that is netprov. When you post on Facebook in “A group where we all pretend to be ants in an ant colony,” you are already engaged in the art of netprov. Netprov shares the same easy, creative energy as the proliferating chains of songs and dances on TikTok. Netprov is something you may do every day without realizing it. Millions do.
This may all sound very high tech, but netprov is just a form of writing. I’m a creative writer. I’m a lover of older literature, especially literature that responded to new historical conditions with new ideas, new styles, and new forms. So as people began to write on platforms other than ink and paper, I started to see amazing pockets of creativity—of fiction—in the most unexpected places. People would write silly reviews of products and services, using exaggerated character voices. People would play extravagant characters in chat rooms for their friends’ amusement. Then their friends would respond as their own characters, and whole stories would evolve. People would make parody websites and keep updating them as things went worse and worse for the fictional site owners. I found myself tuning in to these evolving stories regularly, waiting impatiently for the next installment.

I started to look at a whole host of electronic writing practices, even ones that were supposedly nonfiction but were, well, fudging things a bit, exaggerating to make their narrators look better (or comically worse). I realized how many of these new forms were just begging to be pushed a little bit further, to be parodied, to be turned into fiction the way biographies and memoirs had once been gradually “fictionized” and turned into novels.

I realized that, because of the possibilities of the Internet, these new forms easily could be collaborative, with groups of friends, or even thousands of strangers, improvising stories together in real time. I could look at them as Internet literature, but also as a form of improv theater. I started thinking of them as “netprov.”

Then I asked the question that writers ask when new literary forms are being goofed around with for fun. I think of it as the Shakespeare question (not that I’m comparing myself to Big Bill—but with this beard? a little?). Shakespeare and the Elizabethan writers said, “Look, we all love going to these wild, fun, folksy courtyard plays about the wages of sin with their villains and clowns and swordfights and pig bladders full of fake blood. And we also love these ancient Greek and Roman plays with their beautiful writing and deep ideas that the cool Renaissance kids in Italy are starting to imitate. What if we combined the two? How good can a courtyard play be?”

So you’re asking: How good can a netprov be?

Hey, subheading, you stole my big line! But yes, that’s what I’m asking; that’s what this book is about. That’s what my writer friends and I have
been trying to find out for the last decade by doing lots of fun experiments. I’m sharing what we’ve discovered so far.

**How do I know if something is a netprov or not?**

For the purposes of this book I’m going to focus on netprovs that:

- create fictional stories that are networked, improvised in real time, and often collaborative;
- use primarily written language along with some images and videos;
- may use multiple media platforms simultaneously;
- are experienced as performances as they are published, and are read later as literary archives;
- may incorporate breaking news during the performances;
- may include content that is topical and satirical;
- may use models or actors to physically enact characters in images, videos, and live performance;
- may include players who play, as actors, the characters they create and write;
- may require players to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and document their activities;
- accommodate episodic and incomplete reading;

**Wait—is netprov like an Internet hoax?**

Netprov is not a hoax. Nor is it trolling or fake news. Netprov comes out of a long tradition of fiction and satire, using the same strategies pioneered by early novelists and early journalists, the same strategies we enjoy in ironic social media posts we share and in the bitingly comical TV shows we binge-watch. Instead of seeking to deceive or inflame, netprov seeks to heal, enlighten, and inspire, holding up a gentle mirror in which we can see our foibles. Netprov is a safe, cultural space to play out aspects of our personalities.

The genres we now readily identify as literary fiction and journalism evolved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries amid a surreptitiously printed sea of anonymous urban myths, meme-like cartoons, libellous handbills, and outright false “true accounts.” Influential English
journalists Richard Steele and Joseph Addison cowrote their periodical *The Spectator* (1711–13) by sharing the pseudonym Mr. Spectator—a fictional, idealized voice of the times. They intermingled hard news with imaginary characters and invented, but true-to-life, moments of contemporary existence. Some readers knew who the real writers were; some did not. Fact circled round with fiction in an entertaining dance. As the decades went by, historians and critics worked to define the rules of the game of genres such as novel and newspaper. Fiction came to be understood as “the lie that tells the truth” and news as “nothing but the facts.” By the mid-twentieth century, literary fiction, on one hand, and evidence-based journalism, on the other hand, had matured and became more recognizable.

But the twenty-first century is more like the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than the mid-twentieth. New communication technologies and their new writing styles have thrown everything back into the mixer. We are surrounded by genres in their infancy. The post-2016 wave of Internet disinformation—sometimes amateurish, sometimes chillingly professional, as in the Russian Internet Research Agency’s social media efforts at voter suppression—exist now alongside sincere and well-meaning artistic netprovs. To help sort it out, I’ll talk more about the boundaries of fiction, hoax, and so on later in this book.

**So netprov is part of literature?**

Netprov is interdisciplinary, drawing ideas from five main creative worlds (see Figure 1) as well as pieces of many others. Netprov creators come to netprov with primary training and experience in any of these different worlds, usually more than one.

Netprov draws from the world of imaginative literature, with its short stories, novels, poems, and creative experiments. Netprov draws from theater with its memorized plays, improvised “improv,” shows, and all kinds of street theater and avant-garde performance. Netprov draws from mass media such as film and TV and all their related forms, including game versions, books made from films, cosplay events, and the vast sea of fan fiction. Netprov draws from the world of games—particularly ones in which stories are expanded or invented by players, such as tabletop role-playing games and live-action role-playing games. And of course netprov draws from the world of the Internet, personal media, and social media, where the creativity of millions of users is shaping a multitude of creative subcultures.

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You can see what a strange hybrid netprov is (against this interdisciplinary backdrop) the minute you start to write about one. For example: If you simply list a date for the netprov, a reader may figure that it was a one-time thing whereas it’s quite possible for the same netprov recipe to be repeated any number of times. If you describe a netprov as “first performed” on such and such a date, you place netprov squarely within the theater tradition, which means it can be repeated but brings with it the suggestion of a separation between performers and audience, whereas a netprov is open to everyone to cocreate. If you say “first played,” it suggests a game, which is replicable and participatory (especially so-called serious games used for education, emergency simulation, and collaborative narrative games such as Dungeons & Dragons), but to a nongamer, “played” might not suggest the degree of user creativity netprovs have. If you say “first shown” or “exhibited,” you are pointing to the tradition of visual arts in which the works usually remain unchanged and in which there is usually close attention to the brand identity of the artist. If you say “first released” or “dropped,” it has echoes of movies, TV, or recorded music. If you say “first posted,” it sounds like grassroots social-media use, and if you say “first launched,” it suggests an entrepreneurial effort.

Personally, with my literature background, I might be most tempted to say a netprov was “first written,” but that neglects the images and videos that are part of netprovs. And again, that risks condemning netprovs into being one-time-only relics rather than living creations. For better or for
worse, I tend to think of netprovs as having “first appeared,” which seems to me to have an unlimited duration, a sense of multiple creators, and is sometimes used to describe culture of mysterious origins.

Other concepts in netprov also reveal its varied heritage. For example, I’ve come to use the word *netrunner* for the creators and lead writers of a netprov, based on the TV term *showrunner*, the most powerful creative person on a show, and *player* for someone who participates in a netprov. Technically, netprov players are more like writer-actor-designers. But I love the word *player* first because it’s lighthearted (and overseriousness can stifle creativity) and second because it’s used for sports and games as well as being an older word for actor.

**How did you get started doing netprovs?**

That’s a question I love to ask new netprov players, because everyone—you included—comes to netprov from a different path. I have a Russian literature and graphic design background. I came to collaborative writing via the exploits of a group of creators called Invisible Seattle, with whom I had the great fortune to play starting in the early 1980s. The group did surrealist-style literary performances at Seattle’s annual Bumbershoot Festival, published imaginative manifestoes, and coordinated the assembly and publication of a crowdsourced “novel of Seattle, by Seattle” on a computer platform in 1983. That winter, we Invisibles began to do creative writing together on the dial-up, electronic bulletin board IN.S.OMNIA, nearly a decade before the World Wide Web took off. We discovered the joys of “doing voices” in the then-exotic new medium. We cracked one another up playing characters and improvising dramas and novels, intermingled with serious readings of contemporary philosophy and reflections on politics and economics. I documented these early exploits in a book called *Invisible Rendezvous: Connection and Collaboration in the New Landscape of Electronic Writing.*

Once the World Wide Web opened networked writing to a wide user base, I started using the new platforms to expand the playful creating I’d been a part of on IN.S.OMNIA. I wrote a month-long novel in email, *Blue Company*, to which one of its readers, author Scott Rettberg, responded by writing a partner email novel, *Kind of Blue*. I created a fictional web 1.0 home page, “Fall of the Site of Marsha,” and I posted a week’s worth of chat on a fictional company’s Internal chat room that supposedly “accidentally” becomes public, “Friday’s Big Meeting.” Most importantly, I
started seeking out others—present and past—from all backgrounds who had been doing similar projects to learn, share, and collaborate.

Who else did you find who had been doing netprov-style projects?

In music, jazz had already long established a sophisticated tradition of artistic collaboration and real-time improvisation. Writers and visual artists in groups such as the Dadas and surrealists had done systematic collaborations, often in the form of rambunctious party games. Theater improv was an expanding cultural force. There were educational role-plays and other serious games. Finally, I began to catch wind of some who were using the new electronic platforms the way we had in Invisible Seattle. In 1998, Sue Thomas and Teri Hoskins stitched together a web page in the form of a quilt. Clicking on each patch revealed a short text written by an author somewhere in the world, describing what they saw from their window at noon. N_o_o_n Q_u_i_l_t and its visual interface showed an exciting path for online collaborations.

Then I stumbled across a sprawling website, the hypertext novel *The Unknown*. This project began when writers William Gillespie, Scott Retberg, Dirk Stratton, and Frank Marquardt embarked on a tour of readings from an anthology of fiction they had compiled. Having been introduced to early electronic literature experiments organized by the author of wonderful, self-aware metafictions Robert Coover, at Brown University, they proposed to write a set of interlinked web pages to document the tour. This was to be an amusing side project to the anthology—a side project that soon got out of hand. Fact began to mix with fiction as each writer recounted the others’ extravagant behavior in the third person:

Both William and Scott had become increasingly concerned about the effect Dirk’s cult was having on the book tour. On the one hand, the perks weren’t bad, the lobster meals for one, or the occasional make-out session with whichever disciple wasn’t chosen to join Dirk.

But just as often the tone would be reflective:

“Dirk isn’t cut from the same cloth as us,” Scott says sadly. “I mean he’s a poet, an authentic poet. He can go for weeks without eating or writing. Me, if I’m hungry, I’ll charge the shit on my overextended credit cards. And write a story about it...”
“Frank and Dirk together would make one real good hypertext novelist,” William mutters softly, beneath his breath. “If we could only combine them. . . .”

“We’d encounter some opposition,” Scott says excitedly, “but who knows, you just may have an idea there. I mean they can clone sheep now. I’d imagine that there are skilled surgeons. . . .”

“Mike knows some people,” William says quietly, “and this is strictly sub rosa, my friend, if this were to get out, it would be bad, very bad. But in Urbana there have been some experiments, funded by the Department of Defense—”

“Experiments, like what kind experiments?”

“Let’s just say that Mary Shelly was ahead of her time.”

“No way.”

I was enchanted! The writing process of *The Unknown* happened in two ways, and after I got to know the authors, I was honored to participate in both. One was exhilarating, “live writing” sessions where some or all of the writers would be gathered in the same place, often a hotel room or bar, writing in short bursts and then reading chunks aloud to gales of laughter. Then there was an online mode, where the writers, living in different cities, would post chunks of text on the Internet and read and respond from afar. Networked writing, I came to realize, could allow people to enjoy the social delights of collaborative, creative play, even at a distance.

Later, I found out about writer Mark Marino’s witty website *Bunk Magazine*, which, among many other cool projects, had responded to the *Los Angeles Times*’s creation of a wiki-based editorial section (aka the wiki-torial debacle) with a participatory satire called “The Los Wikiless Times-pedia” that imagined the *Times* committing to publish solely as a wiki. Marino and his collaborators engaged in revert wars, editing and reediting one another’s entries, recreating the quibbles and flame wars to which wiki making is prone.

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.

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-irresistible pasttime for me.”
Nothing will stop this Raccoon. As it declares, “My work on it is not complete.”

The billion-plus editors of Wikipedia could not be reached for comment.

I loved the work, and I reached out and discovered in Mark Marino a kindred spirit. Mark, it turned out, likes collaboration as much as I do, and the two of us have been organizing netprovs ever since.

I was also intrigued by the idealism of game-designer-scholar Jane McGonigal. People will go to great lengths, McGonigal shows in her book *Reality Is Broken*, just for the chance to work really hard for no pay at their computers when they feel that there is a project at hand worthy of their effort and intelligence, when they feel that they are doing “something big.” McGonigal’s work pointed me toward projects from the game world that encouraged me to feel that netprov, too, could be something big.

So you really think netprov can become a big-time art form?

I think all the elements are there, yes. One early experiment in particular seems to me to really prove the concept, and I write about it several times in this book; it’s the netprov *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

Join me, dear reader, on stage back in 2011 for the debut public night of *Grace, Wit & Charm*! Yes—on a theater stage. I’m not trained as an actor, but the fun of the netprov helped me get over my fear of playing the role of Bob, the beleaguered boss. I loved the big laugh created by my solemn invocation: “We ask the audience to please keep your phones turned on throughout the performance!” What the audience didn’t know was that they would be contributing to the story via their questions on Twitter. *Grace, Wit & Charm* was designed to try out all the dimensions the I could imagine for a netprov, including live stage performances with the writer-actors embodying their fictional characters 24/7 during the two-week run.

The fictional concept is this: *Grace, Wit & Charm* is a discreet business that offers gamers, chatters, and status-updaters assistance with their online self-presentation. If your game avatar is moving clumsily, one of the live Character Enhancement Agents will jump into a motion-capture studio and secretly make it move beautifully (the service called “Grace”). If you don’t have a great sense of humor, agents will ghostwrite hysterical posts for you (“Wit”). And for the romantically impaired, the company
offers “Charm”; the agents will flirt or conduct an online romance on your behalf.

To its audience, the netprov is a workplace comedy that lets them read (all week on Twitter) and see (once a week in the theater and streamed) the behind-the-scenes banter of four hardworking Character Enhancement Agents from Grace, Wit & Charm’s Duluth, Minnesota, office, during a special, two-week open house.

But even though the Grace, Wit & Charm corporate overlords imagine the open house as a fantastic promotional event, what is revealed on Twitter is a quirky, spunky, and beleaguered group of Character Enhancement Agents who have been working overtime to the point of exhaustion. In a reflection of the belt tightening and overtime pressures of the post-2008 recession, Bob the boss challenges the frazzled crew to outproduce their nemesis Shreveport office in the next two weeks and earn an actual paid vacation—the company’s first ever.

The long hours mean our four agents must live their personal lives at work and therefore in the netprov. Between solving customer assignments for Grace, Wit & Charm, the close-knit group helps Laura manage her love life, helps Deb deal with her house full of kids, helps Neil accept the fact that his military-contractor wife in Afghanistan is cheating on him, and helps Sonny prep for the radio-controlled model snowmobile Grand Nationals.

Readers of the netprov followed the emerging plot lines in Twitter and linked to a fully functioning Grace, Wit & Charm company website (see figure 2).
As a netprov, *Grace, Wit & Charm* happened online, but it also occurred in the physical world. Reader-players could come to Duluth’s Zeitgeist Teatro theater on Wednesday nights of the two-week run to see the characters step onto the stage and live out one hour of their hectic work lives. Artist and writer Joellyn Rock created a production design on stage that resembled a motion-capture studio with a giant computer screen showing fantastic projections, and costumes that looked like motion-capture suits. During the performance, the audience was encouraged to tweet *Grace, Wit & Charm* assignments to the agents on stage, who duly took these prompts as the basis for comic scenes (see figure 3). The characters and basic plot for all two weeks were developed by me along with help from Mark Marino, but the specific lines were always improvised and were free to wander widely from the outline.

![Figure 2. Top of the web page of Grace, Wit & Charm.](image-url)
Netprovs are for artists with a day job. None of the original cast of players of *Grace, Wit & Charm* was a full-time actor. It made me realize netprov is perfect for creative folks with busy lives. And the feedback from those in that initial audience who could follow the characters’ Twitter feed, come to the live shows, submit challenges, and watch them acted out in front of them, who rode along with the characters’ story lines, happy and sad, proved *Grace, Wit & Charm* was a rich, complete cultural experience. *Grace, Wit & Charm* showed me netprov has legs.

**I can goof around in social media but I could never be a real writer, could I?**

Oh yes, you can! And you will if you play along with this book! I can feel you resisting as you read. So let me take care of it right away with a golden tip for netprov players and netprov students: the reason you may think, “Oh I’m not creative like that” is that you have internalized some negative feedback you got along the way and created what psychologists call an “inner critic” in your own mind. Nothing you do is ever good enough for that inner critic, right? Here’s what you do: lure the inner critic out the door—chocolate helps—and lock it! No inner critics allowed! The neural
circuits involved in judging are important but only at the very end of a creative project, right before you post and publish. They should account for 10 percent, at most, of your creative time. Instead, you want to cultivate the circuits of “what if?” Creativity—whether creating the next line or the next evolution of our species—consists in trying every “what if?” The only answer is “yes.” Anything that occurs to you to try, the answer must be “yes.”

Relax! Lower your standards! Don’t compare! Let yourself play! Then simply read your draft once or twice over, kindly, at the very end, and any necessary changes will suggest themselves to you.

Throughout this book, I’ll offer netprov tips to help you grow your potential as a netprov writer. Life is too short not to play, so play now!

Can netprov be used to teach writing?

Absolutely! Mark and I both do it. Clemson writing professor Michael Russo writes:

I see great benefits in the netprov format, and I am happy to report that it works both in and out of the classroom. In the classroom, it facilitates a playfulness not often seen in writing classes. It helps to circumvent the problem of expertise, and it allows for a wide variety of genres to be implemented naturally. Out of the classroom, it helps to spark creativity, and the psychological connections created are as real as the story is fake.

What other kinds of classes could netprov work in?

Almost any. In this book, I’m going to talk about Destination Wedding 2070, which is a netprov based on climate data imagining a wedding heavily affected by deteriorating conditions and would be perfect for science classes. I’m going to describe a netprov I admire, done by a consortium of scholars where they imagined a World Without Oil, which would work in all kinds of social studies classes. I’m going to share a netprov called Thermophiles in Love, a five-gender dating game for single-celled organisms that investigates gender construction and norming and could be used in a cultural studies, social science, or gender studies curriculum.

In my own teaching, I’ve found that netprov is very successful as homework. A typical assignment will be:

- Answer these four prewriting questions for your character in our class’s online system.
• Upload one post a day from your character to the chosen platform, minimum one hundred words, maximum three hundred words, for the next four days, and advance your character’s story line.

• Have your character respond to three posts from other characters in the next four days and help advance their story lines.

And as a classroom experience, netprov is even more amazing. Writing together, in character, in a simple discussion forum, with students (and teachers) improvising as an ensemble is so much fun! Since it builds on students’ existing social media writing habits, it becomes a powerful way to leap over the dreaded writer’s block and slay the demon Perfectionism. Once students start to follow the netprov advice of reading aloud texts by others that made them laugh, the energy builds. By the end of a netprov session, you can ask them to step back and admire what they’ve written and they’re astonished by their own imagination and productivity.

What’s in the rest of this book?

Sections marked Try This are perfect for classrooms or an evening’s fun with your friends. Sandwiched among the Try Thises are the reflections on cultural history and the contemporary scene. Separate sections contain examples of netprovs that show some of the key features of the form that I hope will inspire you to invent and play your own netprovs. When you do, make sure to write me and let me know!

In addition to the term players, I use here the term featured players, which specifically means the jolly group of usual suspects—writers, artists, scholars—who join Mark Marino and me for nearly every one of the netprovs we produce. Among the featured players, we have private rehearsals and share a bit more behind-the-scenes strategizing than we do with the players. We write together in real time, in person or via video-conferences, and gales of laughter ensue. My hope is that you’ll develop a group of featured players of your own, folks who get together in person to play netprov in real time when you can and on your phones when you can’t.

In Chapter 1, “The Impulse to Fiction,” I look at the basic creative impulse to make fiction as it develops in growing human beings and how it flowers in available media in simple, one-voice, one-character netprovs. You’ll be invited to try some. I’ll offer starting points and tips. I’ll talk about the differences between spoken and written improv and the wonderful peculiarities of visible language as seen in graphic design.
Then in the next section, “The Ballad of Workstudy Seth, a Netprov: An Impulse to Fiction Becomes a Character,” I’ll take you on the trail of a (fictional) work-study student in a tailspin.

In Chapter 2, “Solo Netprovs,” I’ll give examples and tips about creating, developing, and sustaining one-character stories. I’ll talk about how being aware of the design of the platform you’re using can help you. And I’ll discuss how to choose a platform for a netprov.

Following this, “All-Time High, a Netprov: A Playground for Playing Multiple Characters,” the next section, looks at a big netprov called All-Time High for which players created Twitter accounts for their high school selves and we all went to high school together for a month (along with everyone else who has ever lived). The multiple characters are hilarious and harrowing.

Chapter 3, “Playing Multiple Characters and Producing Larger Netprovs,” looks at the dialogic impulse in our minds, and shares some favorite netprovs in which one player plays two or more characters. I discuss some notable writers from the past who wrote in different authorial voices. I ask, “Who is the real you?” and look at how we all construct and polish our public identities on the web.

In the example “Fantasy Spoils, a Netprov: Speaking Stories Together, Dungeons & Dragons Style,” I look at the tradition of collaborative narrative in the tabletop gaming world, where friends use dice and books of character attributes to guide improvised storytelling, through the lens of a Dungeons & Dragons-based netprov that brings everyday reality into the fantasy realm.

I look at the inspiration netprov draws from theatrical improv in Chapter 4, “Playing Well with Others,” and learn from the ancient comic tradition of the commedia dell’arte. I talk about how to craft creative invitations to come play netprov and give lots of tips and suggestions about how to support other players as you play. I also start to share some behind-the-scenes structures that Mark Marino and I use to keep netprovs running smoothly.

In the example “I Work for the Web, a Netprov: Revolution in the Feed,” I’ll talk about how I Work for the Web addressed the social media business model of liking, favoriting, and sharing as unpaid marketing labor. I suggest ways in which creating fiction within major platforms offers a carnivalesque escape from corporate control.

In Chapter 5, “Satirical, Situational Netprovs,” I examine netprovs that take on current events as they are happening. These netprovs use media
interactivity to reach audiences and make points in ways not otherwise possible.

I’ll look at the ethics of netprov in the era of trolling and fake news, and at netprov’s fundamental mission to heal and educate as it entertains.

In “Reality: Being @spencerpratt, a Netprov: Join the Game with a Reality TV Star!,” I look at how Mark Marino was given permission to use the official Twitter feed of reality show star Spencer Pratt, who was sequestered in the British version of the TV show Celebrity Big Brother, and how Mark and I morphed his imposter character Tempspence into a facilitator of crowdsourced creativity.

In Chapter 6, “The Thingness of Language,” I look at netprovs that are games of wordplay, as well as netprov-play with existing, well-defined fictional genres. I invite you to join me in contemplating the absurd and philosophically challenging randomness of the sound and look of language (e.g., to, too, two, toot-toot!). I connect netprov play with the investigations of the wonderful French literary group OuLiPo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (workshop of potential literature). And since there are plenty of books and shows already about cooking with love, I invite you to taste the netprov Cooking with Anger, which incorporates all the usually neglected emotions and blends recipes with storytelling.

In “#1WkNoTech, a Netprov: A Collaborative Thought Experiment,” I’ll show how to play #1WkNoTech (One Week, No Tech), in which we all pretend to go for a week without technology, then share the heck out of the experience in social media.

In Chapter 7, “Organizing and Launching Open-Ended Netprovs,” I’ll discuss creating a basic setting—a world—in which numerous story lines can be improvised according to the players and share examples. I also offer tips for helping story lines evolve.

Next is my presentation of an important early piece cocreated by Mark Marino and friends: “The LA Flood Project, a Netprov: An Environmental/Political Story Line.” The LA Flood Project used the inexorable rise of imaginary floodwaters as a story premise that instantly revealed the socioeconomic disparities between high ground and low ground.

In Chapter 8, “Netprovs with a Story Line,” I look at how open play can be supported even when there is a predetermined story arc. The interwoven subplots of the inaugural version of Grace, Wit & Charm model one way to evolve a group of characters over time while leaving plenty of room for improvisation in the moment.
Following that, I’ll turn to “Destination Wedding 2070, a Netprov: A Sugarcoated Dystopia.” In Destination Wedding 2070, players took on the roles of family members trekking across the globe to a wedding in a location that, when grandma chose it and provided the funds, was idyllic but now is severely compromised by climate change.

In Chapter 9, “Games, Role-Play, and Netprovs in the Real World,” I talk about studying games and game theorists to make netprov better and finding that one of the classic definitions of games, Bernard Suits’s “Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” doesn’t work for netprov. I look at some of my favorite games and the fun of getting out in the real world and performing an online character in real life. I also look at the parallel tradition of idealistic and enjoyable alternate-reality games (ARGs), as presented in the work of game maker and theorist Jane McGonigal. Then, with games of mimicry, parody, and satire in mind, I tackle the question: What kind of game is netprov? I conclude by proposing my own definition: netprov is the voluntary attempt to heal necessary relationships through collaborative play.

In “Thermophiles in Love, a Netprov: Larping Five Genders,” I look at a netprov based on a five-gender dating site for microorganisms. I share the ideas of cocreator and LARP (live-action role-playing game) scholar Samara Hayley Steele about gender playability. Steele developed Thermophiles in Love’s five-gender system and rule set.

Finally, in Chapter 10, “Futures of Netprov: Laughter, Insight, Empathy,” I conclude that netprov is a game of collaborative imagination that has the potential to help rebalance social conflicts and heal social wounds through humor and play. Building on the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project and its support for framing difficult conversations in a productive way, I set a course for possible future netprovs. Working together, learning from other artistic examples, how good can we make netprov?

One more thing: Is asking questions all I can do in this book?

Pardon me?

I would say—I would say the dialogic mode has a long history in Western literature and scholarship and, additionally, is perfectly suited to the easy back-and-forth of contemporary digital writing.
That wasn't really an answer, was it?

Hello? Rob?

Rob? Is it fair just running out on me like this at the end of the introduction?