Netprov

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In the first run of the netprov Grace, Wit & Charm, the centerpiece of the live performance during the second week was an onstage wrist surgery (executed in a pillowcase) in which Laura sought to cure Neil’s carpal tunnel pain. This highlighted the fictional company’s turn from helping gamers online to performing more lucrative virtual health-care work. The next day, followers of the hashtag blushed reading this exchange:

Neil, @Neil_GWaC May 25, 2011
@Laura_GWaC Maybe this was the horse tranqs speaking, but . . . um . . . even though you were cutting my wrists, you were holding my hands. #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 25, 2011
@Neil_GWaC *blush* I liked holding your hands. Your sensitiive, firm Jazz hands. #GWandC

Neil, @Neil_GWaC May 25, 2011
@Laura_GWaC *blush* *blush* *blush* #GWandC

Neil, @Neil_GWaC May 25, 2011
@Laura_GWaC I liked haldong honds, too. *blush* #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 25, 2011
@Neil_GWaC *blush* *blush* *blush* #GWandC

Sonny, @Sonny1SoBlue May 25, 2011
@Laura_GWaC @Neil_GWaC Ah, fer cripes sake, you two! Get a chat-
This is a great example of how netprov players support each other in building a scene.

What are the characteristics of a good netprov player?

The prov in netprov comes from stage improv, and theater is much more helpful in modeling useful characteristics for a netprov player than my original background: literature. Even though projects such as National Novel Writing Month provide a wonderful, jolly community for amateur scribes, literary writing in the European tradition has been considered a solitary pursuit. Theater, on the other hand, is fundamentally and intensely collaborative.

Where does stage improv come from anyway?

Improv as a form of theater arrived on the US scene in the 1950s and 1960s, a period in which the Dada and surrealist ideas about art as a chance operation, and the improvisatory free association of automatic writing, were hip and entering the mainstream. This resulted in movements such as the theater of the absurd of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel 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’wha?

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, gags, and character dynamics from the commedia influenced literary giants such as Shakespeare, Molière, Carlo Goldoni, and others. The raucous, bawdy, British Christmas pantomime of our own day, with its exaggerated characters, naughty double entendres sailing over the little kids’ heads, and ritual audience participation, is a living part of this ancient tradition.

Commedia dell’arte had a fundamental formal difference from “high” theater: it was improvised, not memorized. Its plots were recorded in sce-
narios, as they were called in Italian: simple plot outlines. Its characters formed a traditional, unchanging cast, with costumes, body language, gestures, and voices that probably also dated back to ancient times. “It was simplistic, physical, witty in the way of folk wisdom,” writes Bari 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.”

The spectacular skill of the commedia dell’arte performer is best described by one of the best, Gherardi, in this passage cited in *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.”

Here in this ancient art form we see the figure of the writer-actor of netprov.

**How do these individual improvisers work with the other actors?**

The commedia has unwritten, but highly important, rules for collaboration (like netprov does). These 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.”

PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS 83
Break these rules of generosity and cooperation and you 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.”

So theater people in the ’60s combined this ancient improvised comedy stuff with avant-garde surrealist stuff?

Basically, yes. And they added games.

In the mid-twentieth century, a Chicago theater teacher named Viola Spolin had an idealistic vision that anyone could learn to be an actor if they had an easy and fun way to get started. Spolin’s teacher, Neva Boyd, had based her own use of acting games on her observation of social-mimicry games among inner-city immigrant children. Spolin tested Boyd’s and her own ideas for years with groups of young actors from all socioeconomic backgrounds, and ultimately refined a set of games based on avant-garde theater experiments and the old commedia. She compiled them in the book *Improvisation for the Theater*, first published in 1963. It was Viola Spolin’s son, Paul Sills, who championed his mother’s ideas and believed that they could be useful not only for behind-the-scenes theater training but also as a form of professional theater performance. Sills cofounded Chicago’s legendary Second City, a cabaret-style theater with nightclub tables and drink service. The shows consisted of a combination of prewritten sketches and completely improvised games based on suggestions from the audience.

Into this emerging scene came Del Close, a writer-actor-director who was inspired by both Spolin and the commedia dell’arte. Close had a hand in a succession of groundbreaking troupes, from the Compass Players of Chicago and St. Louis to San Francisco’s the Committee, Chicago’s Second City, and NBC television’s *Saturday Night Live*. He ultimately, with Charna Halpern, founded Chicago’s ImprovOlympic.

Importantly for the deeper ambitions of netprov, Halpern, Close, and Kim “Howard” Johnson wrote about 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. The serious motivation behind all the laughter (the fundamental aesthetic morality of Close’s improv) is summed up in his dictum: “The truth is funny. Honest discovery, observation and reaction is better than contrived invention.”

This cabaret improv tradition thrived in the latter part of the twentieth century, producing as a by-product several generations of popular and influential writer-actors such as Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Steve Carell, Will Ferrell, and Melissa McCarthy, not to mention Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, Mike Meyers, and many others. Significantly for netprov, into the twenty-first century, improv meccas such as Second City and Upright Citizens Brigade have become corporate teaching institutions, with their pay-to-play schools serving not just as feeder systems for the top main-stage troupes but as places for pure participatory activity, like ballroom dance studios or local basketball leagues. People are not content merely to sit and watch; they want to join the fun and play the game. Books such as Alison Goldie’s *The Improv book: Improvisation for Theater, Comedy, Education, and Life* offer advice and exercises for the performing path.

All this time, experimental performance artists were adding to the mix. Among the many other kinds of inspiring performance currently pushing at the boundaries of both the theater tradition and notions of self-represented identity itself are a raft of LGBTQ+ performers. Writing of Eisa Jocson’s performance *Princess* in the *Theatre Times*, Elke Huybrechts notes,

Using the genre of the Disney fairytale and especially the Disney princess Snow White, she interweaves class inequality with gender norms and racial clichés, which operate on so many levels. Queerness becomes an antagonistic force of systematic and systemic disruption here, affecting all these different aspects. In addition, Jocson queers the concept of identity by showing that it’s always a historical construct and never once seems to stop being a construct. Queering has become an indispensable strategy in a complex world in which norms and powers form more intricate structures than ever before.

**What did theater people think about early Internet possibilities?**

With her background in performance studies, Antoinette LaFarge, writing on creative, proto-netprov experiments on online multi-user dun-
geons (MUDs) and MUD object-oriented (MOOs) in 1995, says this about collaborative, networked creativity (then a practice searching for a name), which she calls online theater:

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.12

Note LaFarge’s use of the concept of an online theatrical world. In Invisible Rendezvous, I talked about how the main predigital process for literary collaboration was the add-on story—you do chapter one, I’ll do chapter two, etc.—and usually how unhappy it is. The chapter one writer has most of the fun, the chapter two writer less, until the fourth and fifth writers are trapped in an increasingly narrow box. The simultaneous, theatrical cocreation allowed by digital improv solves this problem.

So what can I learn from theater improv to be a better netprov player?

Del Close was taught as a student of theater that all drama comes from conflict. But the key moment in his development came when he realized, while playing Viola Spolin’s games in front of audiences, that just the opposite is true: agreement is more compelling than conflict. To train his actors in this counterintuitive approach, Close created the Ad Game, which mimicked an advertising-agency brainstorming session. The ironclad 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.13
In their textbook of improvisation, Halpern, Close, and Johnson describe how they teach this counterintuitive principle of agreement 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.

As this idea spread throughout the Chicago improv scene and beyond, it was boiled down to this terse formula: Never say, “No, but.” Always agree. Always say, “Yes, and.”

Here is a great netprov game for practicing this principle of agreement. It comes from the 2013 netprov Center for Twitzease Control, presented in full in chapter 6.

Try This: The WORST Social Media Disease EVER!!! (from Center for Twitzease Control)

The Center for Twitzease Control is wringing its hands, pacing up and down, blubering and texting everyone it knows upon hearing news of a potential outbreak of the Twitzease #twixtreme. Symptoms: Every emotion is taken ABSOLUTELY to its MAX!! The LIFETIME BEST or the COMPLETE WORST!!!! With incredible URGENCY!!! Seriously I am NOT KIDDING!!! Example: I lost my +FAVORITE+ mechanical pencil and MY DAY is *****ing RUINED!!! Why MEEE?!?!?!!! #twixtreme #ctwitzc.

1. Identify a social media platform in which to play.
2. If you need a hashtag, aim for one that helps explain the concept; for this one, we have used #twixtreme.
3. Start a hyperbolic panic about a trivial subject and/or support and add to the panic of other players’ tweets.

If improv was based on theater games, what is the game in netprov?

The term game had two meanings for improv pioneer Del Close. One meaning was the teaching games of Viola Spolin and others. The second meaning of game was 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* may have influenced how Close and other improv founders thought about these everyday games at the time. In the book, based on a school of psychology called *transactional analysis,* Berne describes and names psychological games such as See What You Made Me Do, I’m Only Trying to Help You, and Let’s You and Him Fight.14

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 be 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).15

These informal or semiformal games, based closely on unconscious social and rhetorical tropes embedded in everyday life, are crucially important to netprov.

**How do netprov writers know if they’re doing good work?**

I was trained like most literary writers of the print era, to be starved for feedback from readers . . . and to *keep smiling, darn it!* Aside from the opinions of a few trusted friends or editors, and once-in-a-lifetime letters of praise from readers, the key trait of resilient writers was to be at least 51 percent confident—based on no evidence—and just keep on writing. As my netprov path led me to collaborate more with theater and game people, I realized how different the feedback in their worlds is. Game designers think constantly about the feedback they provide their players in the form of granting scores, visual rewards (or withholding the same), sounds (celebratory or punitive), and even physical jolts to the hands via little motors built into the controllers. Actors have laughter as feedback, and they can feel the mood of the audience even in serious plays. A couple hundred people holding their breath is a thunderous response.

Feedback in the everyday games of mimicry out of which netprov grows generally takes the form of laughter. Trial and error in eliciting laughter hones our comic skills. But there’s an even subtler source of feedback in everyday life. *Phatic communication* is a term used in linguistics and
sociology to denote the nods, shrugs, waves, *ums* and *uh-huhs*, and other small feedback of conversation. Formerly considered meaningless, phatic communication is seen by more recent thinkers as serving a vital purpose of social bonding and support. “What’s up?” long ago ceased being a real question and became more of an “I acknowledge your presence in a friendly way and I am currently available for communication.” These subconscious cues—used copiously by improv actors onstage—got stripped away by early digital writing. To replace them, pokes, pings, emojis, likes, retweets, and a hodgepodge of other gestures were developed. Now these, too, have become nearly completely subconscious. Giving other netprov players born-digital phatic communication feedback, consciously, is key to good netprov play.

**So what are the key things I need to know to be a strong netprov player?**

Try This: Tips for Netprov Players

*Play netprov within earshot of other players if you can.* Netprov is a great real-life parlor game for a night with friends. I have had so much fun over the years hanging out with friends in living rooms, restaurants, and bars doing netprov. If you can’t be together in person, open up a livestream with video or even just audio and netprov together. Voice your encouragement! The laughter and back-channel feedback is encouraging and inspiring!

*Support by repeating.* This is the most basic way of supporting other players. You can do platform-enabled repeating such as retweeting, reposting, and forwarding. And you can literally retype a text or part of someone else’s text and repost it.

*Support by reading aloud.* If other players can hear you, when a post makes you laugh or cry, read it out loud.

*Support by voting.* If the platform you’re using allows some kind of voting (likes, hearts, thumbs-up), make sure to vote for texts you like. If you are playing multiple characters, have them all vote.

*Support by quoting.* In addition to simple repeating, quote from texts as you compose your own posts: As so-and-so said, [insert quote here]; I disagree with so-and-so’s position, [insert quote here]. Use terminology and names that others introduce. Copy and paste for speed. Everybody loves to be quoted.
Support by using emojis, stage directions, and other phatic communication. Write the words “nod,” “smile,” and “shrug.” Write “yeah,” “wow,” or “uh-huh.” Throw in an emoji, appropriate or mysterious. The time-honored, digital phatic statement “LOL” is a shortened version of a stage direction: [laughing out loud], [Rob raises an eyebrow], [twinkles eye]. Remember? [Sits at computer, types: “use stage directions,” exclamation point].

Support by reacting. React directly to other players’ posts as a way to advance your character’s subplot. You can take your character off into the blue, but try to avoid simply doing a monologue alongside others in a feed. Reacting to others in whatever way suits your character reinforces the shared fictional world. Use your character’s reaction to others to jump-start your own subplots.

Support by imitating. If another player is doing something that cracks you up and you think is brilliant, have your character join them in doing the same thing, the way people do in real life. This helps heighten distinctions between characters as they attempt the same thing with varying success. And it is the sincerest form of flattery.

Support by extending. If a player has begun a narrative thread (say they just saw a superhero in real life), support it by extending the idea. You think you, too, saw a superhero, in a coffee shop you just passed. You go back to get a second look. Now extend this just a little: sure enough, there is a superhero using the free wifi. Resist the temptation to take this quickly to a level of absurdity (e.g., everyone in the coffee shop is a superhero). Ramp things up bit by bit, giving each level a chance to breathe. Explore the ramifications of the other player’s original idea.

Give more feedback than you initially think you should. Just like in real life, everyone is a little less confident than they seem to be. Support and encourage. It’ll feel good and it’ll produce deeper art. It’s wonderful fun to play characters who start out doing nothing more than supporting other players’ ideas. Those characters’ depths emerge in the end.

Be patient. Let themes and stories develop. Don’t rush to a conclusion. Let characters explore ambiguities and dilemmas. Have your characters tune in to the dilemmas of others. Listen carefully and your characters will let you know what they need to do.

Be real. All your characters are parts of you. They have strong personality traits but they can be complex too. Don’t feel that they have to be funny (or angry, or mopey) all the time. Let them be ambivalent and share their ambivalence. If you don’t quite understand what’s going on with the
various story lines developing in a netprov, maybe your character doesn’t either. Have them seek clarification within the fiction or offer clarification.

*Netprov means never having to say you’re sorry.* Netprov players constantly apologize for not writing more. No need! New art forms have no norms. Simply smiling at the concept is fine. Just reading a few lines of a netprov is fine. Contributing one post is fine. Contributing a ton of posts, when you have the time, is fine too. No expectations, no standards, no shoulds! You have our permission and our encouragement to make netprov all fun, with no apologies.

**Are there different roles in a netprov group or is everyone the same?**

There are a lot of ways of organizing netprov groups. My ideas about organized collaboration are founded on the fun we had in Invisible Seattle, putting on shows and writing together in person and online. I brought that experience with me into the graphic design and publishing worlds, which were just then transitioning to in-house typesetting and digital design and for which I created new job descriptions and workflows known over the years as “Rob’s Rules of Order.” I needed models and found some in the mid-twentieth-century organization of Hollywood film production centered around Irving R. Thalberg, who had the enviable role of looking in on all the films in production and providing feedback and brainstorming. My official publishing job title of troubadour represented my Thalbergesque duties.

**Try This: Ideas for Organizing Your Netprov Team**

Here’s the way Mark and I organize large netprovs these days.

*Netrunners* are the creative leads, usually developing the concept and writing the invitations. We’ve done netprovs with between one and four netrunners.

*Featured players* are our worldwide friends—artists, writers, and scholars—who come and play with us as often as they can. There are private ways of communicating among the netrunners and the featured players that allow the netrunners to focus creative energy on particular events or issues and to indicate plot points if there is a planned story. They also allow featured players to plan duets and trios. Featured players often reflect among themselves about the shape and progress of the piece.
Players are the beloved friends we haven’t had a chance to meet yet. They include students, when a particular netprov is used as part of a course. It’s all about the players.

A player care coordinator does a number of things, depending on the netprov and the time available. The PCC attends closely to the feed and welcomes newcomers by engaging them, mirroring, responding to them, and reposting. The PCC is often also responsible for online promotion (announcing the netprov in various locations) and publicity (sharing the netprov with media outlets). Once the newcomers are settled in, the PCC acts as a kind of super–featured player, giving feedback to players and featured players who haven’t been responded to in a while. The role of PCC, so foreign to those with a literature background (imagine a writer offering to get a reader coffee or fetch a footstool), joins netprov from the game world, where the focus is strongly on the user. I’ll talk more about the inspiration from the game world in chapter 9.

A graphic designer and a programmer are also involved, depending on the platform and the conceptual needs of the netprov. Sometimes these roles are assumed by featured players, occasionally in the same person, but more complex projects often require paid professionals.

An archivist is in charge of keeping an independent archive of the netprov (you never can rely on the web to store things). This is often a netrunner or a featured player.

**How do I be a good featured player?**

We created the following generic encouragement and guide for our featured players, which we adapt to each netprov:

1. Follow the emails from the netrunners.
2. Locate the online folder that contains the documents for the current netprov.
3. Read the “Basic Premise” document.
4. Read the public “How to Play” page.
5. Share the description(s) of the character(s) you intend to play in the “Character” document, along with your characters’ individual narrative arcs if you know them already, so that other featured players can support your characters.
6. Read about the other characters in the “Character” document so that you can support their narratives.

7. Meet online, or in person if possible, for rehearsals and real-time project play sessions, as needed.

8. Play with abandon!! (If you run out of abandon, we sell our own proprietary strain, Abandanza™, at reasonable rates.)

9. Use the Featured Players Forum or Facebook page, if it amuses you, to share behind-the-scenes thoughts and schemes for the current netprov.

10. Attend, or participate online in, the cast party and readings after the netprov.

**How do you get players to come and play netprov with you?**

We’ve got a mailing list and we send out announcements, starting with a “save the dates” message and then build-up emails counting down to the launch. These announcements usually direct players to a website that either houses the whole netprov or at least contains a short video trailer and the rules of play. We use social media to point to either the feed or the website or both. We’ve developed a generic schedule for netprovs that we adapt for each project that I’ll include in the appendix to this book.

**How do you keep a netprov from getting too chaotic on one hand or too tightly regulated on the other?**

Classic stage improv has an instructive example of creative cat herding. Del Close’s most sophisticated, robust, and long-form improv game is called the Harold, suitable for an evening’s cabaret entertainment. The following caveats by the shapers of the Harold capture perfectly its balancing act between stifling rigidity and the boredom of randomness:

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.¹⁶

If stage improv isn’t 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.” With an inspiring idealism, 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.”¹⁷

How do you come up with and develop ideas for netprovs?

Mark and I keep running lists of intriguing moments of absurdity, frustration, and irony that we observe in the digital realm. Mark’s one-off Facebook joke—that he was showing up and cheerfully going to work for Mark Zuckerberg, liking things all day—became I Work for the Web. Once we’ve got a short list of possible topics, we workshop them behind the scenes with the featured players in what we call the Netprov Tes(x)t Kitchen. Here are its ground rules, which apply to all netprov play:

Netprov Tes(x)t Kitchen

1. **What is it?**
   Weekly, behind-the-scenes play sessions to test netprov prompts and hone our skills. Think jam session. Think yoga class. Think spontaneous, after-work pub crawl.

2. **But I’m so busy!**
   But our standards are shockingly low! Just come and play for a few minutes! You deserve a break from the humdrum.
3. **Who plays?**
   Folks we identify as netprov featured players—the regulars, the usual suspects. Let us know if you want to nominate someone!

4. **When does it happen?**
   We play with one prompt for a week or two, with new prompts usually coming out on Mondays.

5. **Is it a live, real-time thing or can I participate any time during the week?**
   Both. You can play asynchronously at any time. In addition, we'll often announce a one-hour, live event on Wednesdays. Local folks will gather in person (details in the invite). Folks elsewhere are welcome to join us by live audio; let us know and we'll show you how.

6. **Where do I put my writing?**
   Here in this Google Group forum. Each prompt will have its own topic and you'll make contributions as replies to that topic. We'll use other topics in the same group to make announcements.

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**Do netprov players rehearse their characters?**

Absolutely! Before the launch of *Grace, Wit & Charm*, the usual Friday happy hour gatherings of the featured players became an informal workshop. Writer-actors Cathy Podeszwa (Deb) and Gary Kruchowski (Sonny) would simply slide into character and improvise long conversations in which they invented and shared backstory. This created both a bond and a body of fictional shared experience to be used later.

On show nights, an hour before curtain in the green room, the quartet 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 that entire netprov was when I came in to the green room, frantically searching for one of production designer Joellyn Rock's brilliant props 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 opening of the live shows was a “soft start,” with the characters simply wandering 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 Jean Sramek didn’t have to give
them a signal to begin. They simply sighed, looked at their watches, and trudged dutifully “back to work.”