Netprov

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CHAPTER 7.

ORGANIZING AND LAUNCHING OPEN-ENDED NETPROVS

All netprovs start within some kind of fictional world. This is crucial to avoid the pitfall of what we used to call, in Invisible Seattle, the “graffiti wall” structure of collaboration: “We’re going to put paper all over the wall and set out markers; now come be creative!” Without a guiding concept, the results are often boring: false starts and canned gags.

Other fields that feed into netprov have their own names for what Mark and I call fictional worlds. “Premise is the term used to describe a fully formed comedic idea found in an opening,” write Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh in the textbook for their popular stage improv company Upright Citizens Brigade’s (UCB) improv classes. UCB also calls a premise a “base reality.”

The fictional worlds Mark and I create tend to spring from moments in new technologies where the everyday writing people are already doing reveals some hidden stress. The discouragement caused by our encouraging fitness apps, for example, is the subject of the netprov 1Step Forward, 2Steps Bak¹ that posits a “bakstepping” craze and keeps users’ scores always a few baksteps away from their goals. Many of our netprovs concern fictional businesses since businesses loom large as “characters” in the harsh soap opera that circulates resources in our consumer society.

Once you’ve got a fictional world, how do you share it with netprov players?

Sometimes the name or even the hashtag of the netprov itself explains the concept, like with #1WkNoTech, a week without technology. At the
very least, the name should serve as a reminder of the fictional world. The name of the netprov Air-B-N-Me, of course, plays off the currently popular apartment-sharing website Airbnb. We’re also guided by the Hollywood filmmaking axiom that if you want the audience to know something you must tell them three times, so we try to sprinkle the key elements of the fictional world in different locations. Here is the initial invitation to Air-B-N-Me from the top of the corporate-looking, registration-only, forum website:

Welcome to Air-B-N-Me!

In this exchange economy, we share our cars, our homes, and all our stuff. What if we could share our lives?

If you ache to be anywhere but here, welcome to Air-B-N-Me, a new experience in lifeswapping. When you feel like checking out of your own life, check in to somebody else’s. Why not turn your downtime into a timeshare?

Air-B-N-Me is the original (and still the best!) online lifeswapping community.

Players took the Air-B-N-Me premise and ran with it:

“igottaBme2, 02.04.2016
Meet my boyfriend. He’s courteous, caring, and comely. So, like the last 4 boys, I’ve got to break up with him. Only I can’t. Every time I go to break up with him, he brings me my favorite Thai dishes or offers me a foot massage. But you’ve probably got a spine. So come on in and kick him to the curb for me. Thanks!
Time: Saturday 9–10pm
Streaming Time: 9:59pm EST Username: 2Kind2BKCrul (YouTube)

PleasantAnne, 05.04.2016
REVIEW OF MY VISIT
Wow!
You are not kidding.
He is seriously charming. The son of Paul Rudd and George Clooney!
I was going to use this as a try-out of the TIGER! TIGER! attitude I’m learning at my women’s self-defense class where we get to bash Mr. Nichols in his padded suit.
I went into this visit all “TIGER! TIGER!” and going to read this loser the riot act.
But then he started asking questions. Questions! Of me! And really pretending to listen!
So 4 hours later I was snuggled up on his shoulder watching something called Fuller House.

Sorry!

I’d rate this visit: [bliss emojis]”

We used marketing language on the website to model the premise:

“**Monetize your Monotony!**
Rent the lost moments of your life and earn big bucks!
Be an Air-B-N-Me Lowner (Life-Owner)
When you check out of your life, someone else checks in!
   “I recarpeted my garage with the money I made!”—Tony P.
   “I’m just glad someone could use it!”—Maria. S.
   Check out for an hour at a time!
Airbnme—earn from your biggest asset! Your unused life!

**Crave more zing?**
Be someone completely different! Affordably!
Be an Air-B-N-Me Lurfer (Life-Surfer)!
When someone checks out of their life, you check in!
   Be a surf instructor!
   Be an airline pilot!
   Be a White House aide!
   Be a back-up dancer!

Air-B-N-Me—when you want to be anyone but you!”

We love to share the rules of play within the fictional world of the netprov.
The science-fiction mechanics of the *Air-B-N-Me* world can be explained on the website in marketing language.

**How Air-B-N-Me Lifeswapping Works**

1. **Want to make money?** Sell unused bandwidth from your life by posting an ad on our easy-to-use Lowner (Life-Owner) site.
2. **Want to get away from it all?** Be a Lurfer (Life-Surfer)! Select a Lowner whose life you like. We have lives to match any budget!
3. When the Lowner checks out during the 3 D’s—Distraction, Detachment, Denial—the Lurfer checks in! The Lowner goes on auto-pilot, doing what they normally do but the Lurfer gets the full experience of what happens.
4. Lurfers can make suggestions for Lowner behavior, but Lurfers shouldn’t be surprised if they get no response. Lowners are bound by the Power of Habit and won’t do things they don’t normally do.

5. Enjoy not being you up to a maximum of 1 Hour (which science says is well short of the bonding/transfer threshold).

6. Be in (B-N) the Lowner’s body—see what they see, hear what they hear, taste what they taste!

7. Write a review of your visit to help others make their choice!

8. Rental fees are automatically transferred from the Lurfer’s account into the Lowner’s.

9. Quality is ensured by random 1-minute AuthenticaptureTM videos taken during visits.

10. Anonymity is key; no repeat visits; no hard feelings.

This list contains a combination of real, practical advice for the player of the netprov alongside purely fictional elements. The player is told that the creative play consists of writing reviews of their visit and in making one-minute videos. At the same time, it is an artistic reflection on a vital subject—our actual everyday of experience of this mediated world, how awake (or asleep) we are to the gift of life.

Since *Air-B-N-Me’s* premise of lifeswapping brought with it a number of science fiction questions, we chose the typical website form of a frequently asked questions page to frame the play:

**About Hosting and being a Lowner (Life-Owner)**

Q: Does it hurt?
A: No, not at all! Since you are usually spacing out and absent from your sensations anyway, life will pass just the same as it always does—you won’t feel (or remember) a thing. And you’ll be earning good money!

Q: What happens if someone leaves a mess?
A: The beauty of the Air-B-N-Me system is that they get to rate you and you get to rate them. Any Lurfer who gets too low scores gets banned. So, basically, nobody’s going to be a slob!

Q: How honest should I be in my ad?
A: Authenticity is kind of subjective as we see it. Experts say we all tend to devalue our own lives for sympathy and point instead to the novelty
effect where travel meals taste better than home meals. Don’t be afraid to highlight the positive!

Q: What is it like to return to myself after a Lurfer has visited?
A: Scientists say it’s just about the same as when you realize you’ve been on Facebook longer than you planned. You shake your head, take a deep breath, and get your a** in gear. Only you’re richer!

**About Visiting and being a Lurfer (Life-Surfer)**

Q: Should I bring anything on my visit?
A: You can’t! Part of the fun is relying on what your Lowner has in their world in the way of food, clothing and emotional support. Adopt an attitude of curiosity and be flexible. “Surf the earthquake!”

Q: As a Lurfer am I able to control the body of the Lowner?
A: Don’t count on it. You can try to suggest actions, but you can’t make a Lowner do something they wouldn’t normally do. The most you can do is DJ your Lowner from a playlist of their own usual behaviors. Sometimes Lowners don’t react to you at all and you’re just along for the ride.

Q: Am I responsible for taking care of my host’s relationships?
A: Nah! They’ve made their bed, and you get to lie in it for a little while, that’s all. At worst, your actions as the Lowner will provoke questions like: “Are you listening? Are you OK? Do you even care about this marriage?” in other words: normal, everyday reactions. Treat everyone with respect and pretend you have a touch of the tummy flu. That will get you through any awkward situation!

Q: What if it gets weird?
A: Define weird! We’re all human beings on planet Earth. We all share gravity, water, regrets. How weird can it get? As we like to say: “one person’s weird makes for a great little getaway!”

Q: When I’m visiting, do I have my food allergies or my host’s?
A: Just like emotions, skills, and beliefs, your allergies belong to your host. Eating foods you can’t normally eat is just one of the many pleasures of Lifeswapping!

Q: Do I stay emotionally connected to my host after I’ve been them?
A: No! You’ll have good memories and a fond glow, but that’s all. Full-on flashbacks are exceedingly rare.
What if I’m running a netprov and players need help getting their minds around the fictional world?

Rightly or wrongly, we tend to assume players are acquainted with the cultural habits we’re lampooning and have basic skills on the platform we’ve chosen for a netprov. But sometimes we offer more step-by-step advice.

Try This: Air-Be-N-Me Step-by-Step

Since Air-B-N-Me was by invitation only, Mark was able to write these more detailed instructions for students and invited players:

1. Before you play:
   ◦ What are moments in your life when you tend to tune out?
   ◦ What are moments when you’d like to be anywhere but there? (Perhaps because the moment is too intense, too uncomfortable, too important.)
   ◦ How might others appreciate these same moments?
   ◦ Whose life would you like to swap into? Why?

2. Create one or more characters.
   ◦ Character Name:
   ◦ Age: (you’ll need a fictional birthdate to register on the forum)
   ◦ Gender:
   ◦ Location: (city, country)
   ◦ Occupation:
   ◦ Screen Name of Character (no spaces)
   ◦ Descriptive phrase
   ◦ Amenities: (What comes with your life?)
   ◦ Unique About Me: (a phrase or two that accentuates the desirable features of your life)
   ◦ Primary Availability: (list three times you’d like to check out of your life)
House Rules: (any restrictions, things lifeswappers can’t do with your life)

3. In the forum, post advertisements on behalf of your characters as Lowners (Life-Owners), advertising the everyday downtime available for use by others.

   - Consider writing an ad for:
     - A totally boring moment
     - A moment that involves something not promised (in the description)
     - An uncomfortable or awkward moment
     - A stressful moment
     - An unexpected life event

4. In the comments after the advertisements, post reviews of your experiences as a Lurfer (Life-Surfer) in the lives as described. Stay close to the life moment as described in the ad.

5. Post one-minute videos purporting to be the random Authenti-captureTM videos for various Lowners. Shoot one minute of a point of view shot, as though the person is looking through your eyes. Use the vertical (tall, portrait) format.

   - Plan out your time. Even one minute of video can seem like an eternity if it’s not planned.
   - Put a surprise in every video, something unexpected.
   - Don’t show any faces.
   - Avoid showing personal info: your license plate, your address, etc.
   - Show your hands and feet. For some reason this helps give the impression that the person is inside you.
   - The Lowner should not speak during their broadcast.
   - The Lurfer (viewer/renter) should marvel at the experience—since they appreciate everything the Lowner takes for granted.
Why are you asking people not to show faces in their images?

Showing no faces is one of the netprov best practices that has emerged over the years, for several reasons. It makes it easier to play a character who is unlike you. Paradoxically, it looks like it has “higher production values”; viewers can’t as easily compare your look and gestures to that of professional models and actors. By being more raw, it also can look more “real,” more naturalistic. Finally, if you want to publish your version of the netprov, it means you don’t necessarily have to get signed, legal permissions from your models.

For the 2014 and 2015 netprov Outsource My Study Abroad, netrunner Kathi Inman Berens and I found that not using faces gave a haunting immediacy to the images as they combine with the stories. The fictional world of Outsource My Study Abroad posited that if players couldn’t really study abroad, they could arrange with foreign students to reciprocally create a virtual study abroad blog with exotic foreign images. Without faces, players were much more easily able to project themselves into the international experience. Kathi and I offered these encouragements:

Have your models wear some bright color. Use the recognizable color of clothing/hats that your faceless models are wearing to create a visual continuity from location to location and allow readers to project themselves into the proceedings.

Tips for Photography in Netprovs

Since I’m on the topic of imagery and fictional worlds in netprov, the image instructions for the netprov One Star Reviews, below, contain my best photography tips. These tips will radically increase the quality of your everyday, personal social media images as well.

1. No recognizable faces. Hands, feet, backs, and elbows are more evocative (and no legal permissions are needed).

2. No ordinary angles. Which is to say: no blah, ordinary photos with the subject at medium distance and the camera held at arm’s length and chest height. Yawn. There are plenty of these already! Take a tip from the thousands of hours of good cinematography you’ve seen in your life! Take a knee! In fact, lay down on your back and shoot upwards! Stand on a chair and hold the camera by the ceiling! Set the lens of the camera right on the table and shoot...
across the table, right on the floor and shoot across the floor, right on someone’s sleeve and photograph their hand! Do ultra-long shots! Do ultra close-ups!

3. Try using layers of depth. Put something close in the foreground and capture something else far away in the background. Let the camera focus on the windowsill and have the background be blurry, or vice versa.

4. Try representing the world in a still life. Find an arrangement of objects that tells a story. Or make an arrangement of objects that does (e.g., knife + VR goggles + crumpled used Band-Aid packaging; e.g., the love triangle of a salt shaker, pepper shaker, and sugar packet).

5. Don’t steal photos! If you take photos from the Internet, make sure they are copyright free or labeled “for reuse” or “reuse with modification.” Some search engines allow you to filter by copyright. Look for CC licenses.

Even in a project based around selfies, it helped to obscure the face to make the image more of an open invitation. Here’s one of the early images from #1WkNoTech (see figure 1).

Can open-ended netprovs be about serious topics too?

Sure! Just look at the alternate reality game (ARG) World Without Oil. Games theorist Jane McGonigal was part of the creation of World Without Oil, which she calls a “forecasting game” in which players write plausibl "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, and participants reported taking back practical ideas from the game into their professional lives.
Try This: Monstrous Weather

Here’s an example of a netprov invitation that certainly didn’t discourage humor but was designed to set a course into deeper waters:

The week the internet went down, so many of us sat around marveling at the weird weather and telling scary stories. One story lead to another, all around the world. Now we are collecting summaries of these stories. Surely you heard some!

This was the invitation that launched the 2016 netprov Monstrous Weather. It continued:

Tell us: who told the tale, what happens, and how it plays off of real-life weird weather (google it), in 300 words or fewer!

We are not the first to notice that the week the internet went down was exactly 200 years since Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron, kept indoors by the climate disruption of a distant volcano, sat around and told each other ghost stories. Mary invented Dr. Frankenstein. Byron started the vampire craze.

What new and frightening phantasms will be the product of our own Monstrous Weather?

Good invitations don’t hold anything back; the entire netprov is there in the first four sentences.

To give first-time players practical starting points, we followed the more literary invitation with a short list:

1. In 300 words or fewer, summarize a scary story somebody told the week the internet was down.
2. Who told the story? When and where? What happens in their story?
3. Include one bit of weird weather.
4. See if your story can reply to another story. Answer, amplify, remix! Or start a new topic with a new story.

What if players don’t follow the rules of your netprov?

The inaugural 2016 version of Monstrous Weather was by invitation only. We knew the invitees shared literary backgrounds, and although they proceeded to break many of the rules, they broke the rules in a literary way;
which is to say, it was done in a delightful way designed to elicit laughter and insight. Their intent was to broaden, not wreck, the netprov.

Sometimes, though, in broad-participation netprovs, true vandals and trolls come in, trying to negate, mock, and break the game. As Whitney Phillips says in the magnificently titled *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, “Until sensationalist, exploitative media practices are no longer rewarded with page views and ad revenue—in short until the mainstream is willing to step in front of the funhouse mirror and consider the contours of its own distorted reflection—the most aggressive forms of trolling will always have an outlet, and an audience.”

What we’ve found in many of our broad-participation netprovs is that if the premise is robust enough, a good netprov can’t be broken. During the month we spent pretending to go to high school with each other on Twitter in *All-Time High*, we realized that since the real-life high school experience itself is sadly replete with vandals, trolls, and bullies, the occasional trolling simply added to the realism.

**How do you help people get over their shyness and get started playing?**

The first models of play are crucial to a netprov. They are just as important as a good invitation. Alex Mitchell provided a haunting early model for *Monstrous Weather*:

> We sat on the floor in the middle of the room, because that seemed to be the right thing to do.

> Some of us still held our phones, dangling them limply in our hands or resting them on the floor beside us. I occasionally, instinctively unlocked the screen and checked for email, for a status update, for anything, although I knew there would be no signal. Despite the duct tape on the windows and along the bottom of the door, I could smell the burning. The haze got into my nose and mouth, into my hair, and under my nails. I could taste it when I ate, and I dreamed of it while I slept.

> The stories started spontaneously, fragments of memories we shared to keep ourselves sane.

This model serves perfectly as the central node to Mitchell’s excellent hypertext archive of *Monstrous Weather*, which he discusses in the essay *Monstrous Weathered: Experiences from the Telling and Retelling of a Netprov*.

I contributed another:
A Green World

We were laying on our backs looking at the stars. Mark Marino, aflutter with success after winning $284.50 in a marathon poker game, told us a story about how one day a guy goes into the bathroom after playing football with his kid only to discover that the soap doesn’t get the mud off his hands. The guy comes out into the kitchen where his wife is discovering that dish soap no longer gets dishes clean. It turns out that all soap stops working, world-wide, all at the same time.  

And then within twenty-four hours, Jeremy Hight established what was to become a continuing theme of meta narration in his brilliant, self-descriptive post: “Story made from the titles of all the other stories.” The netprov grew in a number of different directions, including a long rant by Scott Rettberg in the voice of the Norse god Thor.

*One Star Reviews* is a netprov concept that is particularly complex and therefore its first models were particularly important. The inaugural version of *One-Star Reviews* took place in 2017 in the form of a subreddit on the forum platform Reddit.

Aren’t most of your netprov premises pretty darned complex?

Point taken. We’re working on that. But . . . um . . . anyway. *One Star Reviews* took as its starting point the basic strategy of marketing. “The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life,” wrote John Berger, way back in the *Mad Men* era of 1972. Christopher Lasch noted succinctly that “advertising institutionalizes envy and its attendant anxieties.”

For *One-Star Reviews*, Mark and I wrote a fictional interview that we sent as support to players:

There’s already a tradition already of ironic reviews on Amazon and elsewhere, lavishly praising dud items. And there’s also a tradition of finding and sharing bad reviews of iconic things—the Grand Canyon, Shakespeare’s Hamlet. What cracks us up about our netprov is creatively finding a third answer to the binary question: Like?/No Like? Our players are exploring with their imaginations and finding amazing things to enjoy in totally unlikeable situations.

The invitation to *One-Star Reviews* is succinct:
One-Star Reviews is a community of fictional characters who find value in things rated at one star.

The first models for One-Star Reviews tried to lead the way:

**Parking Space Full of Clarity**  
MATEUZ’S VACUUM AND SMALL MOTOR REPAIR  
reviewed by Mwa4407, October 2017

On the web Mateuz listed his hours as 9–4:30 weekdays. I pulled up right in front of his strip-mall door at 10:28am only to be greeted by his battered cardboard sign hanging askew and reading “Sorry, We’re Closed.” I burst into tears. Once again my attempt to cross even one item off my mile-long To Do list was thwarted.

I thought about my recent streak of bad luck. Then I thought about Dad’s cancer. Then I thought guiltily about the annual Slip ‘n Slide for Cancer and how much work I still owe them. Then I thought about world cancer rates and whether they are going up or down. Then I thought about my first wife and how with her math skills she’d be the perfect person to Google cancer rates. Then I thought about how I used to love bringing her coffee in bed every morning and how the first morning I didn’t do that was the deepest stab in my heart of the whole divorce. Then I thought about her recent email—out of the blue after 20 years—and how it contained in miniature the whole dynamic of our relationship: “Come here, go away! Come here, go away!”

And then, astonishingly, sitting there I REALIZED FOR THE FIRST TIME that because of her rough childhood she is someone who can’t stand to be loved. She can’t trust it will last. Aww. I get it—small repair shops like Mateuz’s are a vanishing breed and we should be grateful they exist at all!

Thanks, Mateuz!!!

**Fungus Amongus**  
DEL-WRAY MOTEL  
Reviewer: Madame Curious, October 2017

Amenities: Molds of every kind

When I saw all the mold (in the bathrooms, on the blinds, on the popcorn ceiling) in the other reviews, I realized this would have to be my first destination in the floodplains of Johnstown, PA. I grabbed a rucksack of sample kits, hopped in little Thatcher (my sputtering old VW bug which can be a nasty clanking betch), and was on my way. When I got here, the must from the rooms penetrated my mask, engulfed my pores. Spores filled the dim, dingy room with a kind of slow motion dance of microbes.
That people slept here, rested here was amazing to me, but Mark and Lori (married 50 years!) were down by the pool, it’s own special kind of Petri dish. And Mel with his hairpiece, which was alive with mold as well, at the little bar attached to the dilapidated corner of this Mecca of mold, seemed to enjoy it well enough. What astounded me were the cultures—so many different, all cohabitating, becoming, if you will, a kind of super organism, strange and different than any I’d ever encounter again, that seemed to welcome me when I walked in, not with words or handshakes, but with a merry welcoming enveloping hug that immediately began to cohabit and engorge my own biome, making me one with its multitude.

For *One-Star Reviews*, using Reddit, which itself is built around ratings, gave the perfect graphic and visual support to the project.

**So again, the look of the interface is important?**

Yes! It supports the premise, the fictional world. Graphic satires largely have lurked in 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* satire magazine 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*, which closely resembled a typical US high school yearbook, including handwritten notations by the fictional students through which a portrait of the characters and relationships emerged. They also published the *National Lampoon Sunday Newspaper Parody*—a complete miniature, newspaper on newsprint paper, including all the typical sections of an American Sunday paper—the *Akron Republican-Democrat*—which, upon careful reading, revealed webs of intrigue and scandal in the community. The *High School Yearbook Parody* in particular has long seemed to me a perfect example of nonlinear narrative; a complex account of the dramas of the school year emerges no matter the order in which you read the work.
Try This: Outsource My Study Abroad

Outsource My Study Abroad was inspired by the real-life account of a woman ghosting her friends and faking images of an international trip in Facebook. \textsuperscript{12} “Pics or it didn’t happen” goes the common phrase. Here are the invitation and rules Kathi Inman Berens and I used with her students in Bergen, Norway, and my students in Duluth, Minnesota, United States.

Outsource My Study Abroad
“Creating remixable memories since 2014”

Part One: Home Town Photo Expedition; Post Pics and Captions to Group Tumblr
Share what it’s like to be at your campus and your town. Give students in the other town a real flavor of the surroundings. Find the unique places and unique details. Write about your town in creative, artistic, honest and emotional ways. No BS. What is it really like to be a student here?

Step 1: Home Town Photo Expedition
Go on a photo expedition in your city in small teams. Take photos of the kind that would be taken by a study abroad student. It is OK if teams use some of the same locations—just take creatively unique pictures. Include no recognizable faces. Take 30 to get 12: take 30 photos and pick the 12 best ones!

Step 2: Post the Photos to Tumblr with a caption that is both journalistic and novelistic
Each player posts and captions 4 of the photos on the group Tumblr. Each caption should contain minimum 3 sentences. This caption should include a brief factual account of the place: local history, what significance the place might have the lives of students, etc. It should also include a powerful inventory of the subjective experience each photo suggests—smells, sounds, moods—giving students in the other city the flavor of the place.

Part Two: Go on Expeditions Prompted by Players From the Other Town; Post Pics and Images to Group Tumblr

Step 1: Find 4 Intriguing Locations in the other town using Google Maps & Street View
Step 2: Write 3 Expedition Prompts for the Other City’s 4 Intriguing Locations in Google Maps Pins
For each of the 4 locations in the other city you’ve found on Google Street View, write three prompts.

a. A prompt about the PLACE itself, to be answered by photos and text.
   For example: “What is down that alley?”
   “What kind of objects are lying on the ground?”
   “What is the most surprising thing you can see here?”

b. A prompt about some aspect of the INNER, EMOTIONAL LIFE of students, the kinds of things that would come up in a deep conversation with students from the host country IN THIS PARTICULAR PLACE, to be answered by text:
   For example: “Is it easy to make new friends in this town? How do you do it?”
   “What’s it like to be GBLTQ in this city?”
   “What do people do on a first date?”

c. A PHOTO REQUEST for a posed photo—no faces visible, of course—that creates a memorable moment of fun with new friends, written in the form of a memory, to be answered by a photo or photos:
   For example: “Remember when we danced the waltz on the sidewalk?”
   “Remember when we talked all night in the park and watched the sunrise together?”
   “Remember when we were making jokes and eating ice cream and laughing here?”

Step 4: Respond to the Prompts About your City by doing a Photo/Writing Expedition in the 4 Locations That Intrigued Them

Step 5: Put the photos and captions into the shared Tumblr
Each team member posts and captions 4 photos

Part Three: Create Your Personal Virtual Study Abroad Timeline/Newsfeed on your own Tumblr

Step 1: Review the Tumblr photos and captions from the other city.
Step 2: Build your personal virtual timeline/newsfeed

Find 11 images from the other city on Tumblr and add a caption to each of telling a story about what happened to you (and your new, imaginary friends) when you studied abroad in this place. Add a few images from your own city if they contribute to your story line.

Consider the arc of your story. Were you sad and homesick at first, but by the end of your stay you had made great new friends? Did you fall in love? Did you struggle with coursework but get 100% in the final exam?

The “Don’t Ruin Your Job Prospects” Rule: Do not picture or describe the consumption of alcohol or intoxicants.

OK, that’s how to get shy players started. But what about people who go on and on and write too much?

To paraphrase Alexander Pope and William Shakespeare, aiming to keep the number of words you use down to an absolute, bare minimum is the soul of being funny in the moment.³ The three-hundred-word limit of Monstrous Weather, even though it was stretched by some who will remain nameless ([coughs] scottrettberg), generally produced a wonderful form of condensed storytelling. It was helped by the idea that players were repeating and summarizing stories they’d heard from others, and even though compact, the entries often contained a story within a story.

If the platform doesn’t already have content limitations, it often helps to encourage them to keep it short, both in the rule set and the first models. We’ve found that three hundred words is an optimum size, easy to both write and read in stolen moments at work.

What if I’m really stumped and can’t think of a fictional world?

Try a “mockumentary” version of some real-life world you know; your workplace, for example. Mockumentaries in film include This Is Spinal Tap, about a fictional heavy-metal rock band; 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 have been reabsorbed into the mainstream in shows such as The Office and Parks and Recreation, where characters speak and make faces 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 add a flavor of unrehearsed authenticity to the projects and is automatically satirical, as it was in *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

**Try This: Mockumentary Netprov**

1. Pick a place, a fictional world, such as fictional workplace.
2. Begin posting short posts as though you were answering questions from a documentary journalist.
3. Be way more honest than you would in real life; e.g., “This is the room where we hide and waste time.”
4. Describe a big event coming up that everyone in the world is anxious about—a meeting, a job review, a date.

**Some of these netprovs take place on more than one platform. How does that work?**

In our everyday, nonfiction use of media, we follow news stories in multiple media, in a complexly interwoven way. This is called transmedia, and one of the early thinkers about transmedia, Henry Jenkins, defined it this way: “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.” The great comic book and movie franchises of the Marvel and DC story empires are great examples of this, as is the vast narrative of *Star Wars*.

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.”

Transmedia also shares a fundamental gesture in common with alternate-reality games, 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 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.

Who owns characters?

Obviously there is an answer in terms of copyright law and the armada of attorneys that enforce it. But the cultural answer is different. Catherine Gallagher discussing the construction of fiction by the early novel, writes, “Another, seemingly paradoxical, pair of features is closely related and shared by all novel characters regardless of the mode of narration: they are at once utterly finished and also necessarily incomplete.” Her illustration is, “No matter how many times we reread Anna Karenina, there will never be more to learn about, say, the childhoods of the heroine and her brother.” This is a perfect illustration of the importance of which cultural world you come from when you come to netprov. In Gallagher’s world of literature, Anna belongs to Tolstoy, and only what he writes about her can be considered as valid evidence. But in the world of mass media and the web, popular characters have a status somewhere between property and persons. Artistic property belongs to its creators by some combination of legal copyright, an ethical principle of crediting the maker of an object as a recognition of skill and intelligence, and the relationship between parents and children. Persons, by contrast, exist in the public domain and can be researched and written about by anyone. In the case of imaginary characters, research into their background consists of invention, since everything already known about them was also the product of invention. The one hundredth fan fiction writer’s invention about a character has no less logical validity than the first writer’s.
What kinds of stories happen in fan fiction?

Captain Jean-Luc Picard of *Star Trek*, 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 great sex. Fan fiction is when fans extend the narrative of popular characters. Huge, vibrant, interactive fan fiction communities exist all over the web. This delightfully transgressive 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.

Many now enter the path of creative writing through fan fiction and the complex sharing and creative back-and-forth on popular websites such as Archive of Our Own, Fanfiction.net, and Wattpad. Fan fiction practitioners and essayists Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel have an excellent podcast, Fansplaining, that investigates the genre from the inside as ardent fans and writers and from the outside as a cultural, historical, and business phenomenon.

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 Caillois’s terms, breaking the spell by which the actor fascinates the spectator. Further pleasure is the willful intermingling of characters and settings from vastly different fictional worlds. Early electronic-literature pioneer 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.

What can be added to Caillois’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.
How big can a netprov fictional world get?

We live in a culture of binge reading and binge watching. Henry Jenkins observed this evolution when he quoted a screenwriter in the 2000s: “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.”

“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.” This poses the question: Must world building be centralized, broadcast, top-down? Could it be grassroots, from the bottom up?

How long should a netprov be?

Another excellent question! You are really “on” in this chapter!

Um . . . thanks?

Let your intuition, and your to-do list, be your guide. Netprov should be fun; that’s a cardinal rule. If you feel your character has more to grow, then keep going. Mark and I have set time limits to netprovs (based on our own availability) only to find players continuing to create long after our end date. These days I’m looking at the duration and structure of All-Time High to be perhaps the optimum: an overall duration of one calendar month, with real-time live events every Wednesday night. But it will undoubtedly evolve as technology and society change.

Try This: Focused Fan-Fiction Netprov

1. Each player picks a character from their favorite fictional world.
2. Those characters find themselves in an airport; their flight has been cancelled.
3. Romance ensues.
4. How do the characters work together to get each one home?