Netprov

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Scenarios like the rising waters of the *LA Flood Project* provide a narrative trellis that can give netprovs a planned story shape. This is not better or worse than open-ended netprovs; it’s just different. A planned story shape is appropriate for some concepts and not for others.

**Try This: Simple Scenario-Based Netprov: Lighter and Lighter**

With one to three friends, play this simple netprov in the social media platform of your choice:

1. **Days 1–2:** Separately you all notice that your body begins to feel slightly lighter than normal. Share your wonder and distress at the changes. Investigate causes, share hypotheses, corroborate and comfort one another.

2. **Days 3–4:** You notice that your body is even more light now. You can jump farther than before, ascend stairs without fatigue. In addition, you notice that any object you hold is correspondingly lighter than usual. You can lift quite heavy objects. Everything else is normal. Be your usual self, dealing realistically with an unusual circumstance.

3. **Days 5–6:** You continue to get lighter, settling slowly into chairs and leaping when you want to walk. It begins to be inconvenient, even dangerous.

4. **Day 7:** You can fly. Is it a gift or a catastrophe? How would you actually deal with it?
How does a story line work in a larger netprov?

The netprov #BehindYourBak was inspired by the flood of email notices sent by social media platforms trying to coax and scare users into donating more time, particularly emails, that openly play on the fear of missing out. Mark and I wanted it to put players into a progressively deeper hole. This is the basic invitation:

#BehindYourBak, a netprov

Apps beg for our attention. Notifications whine, they tease, they bully. They inflame our social curiosity.

In the netprov #BehindYourBak we pretend our fictional characters have been locked out of their accounts by the stupendous mega-network Behind Your Bak—but they’re still getting notifications! Agh! What are people saying?

Create a fictional character in Twitter and let your character’s imagination run wild.

The scenario for #BehindYourBak is simple:

Phase 1 (first 20 percent of time): express frustration at being locked out and your character feeling like the only one.

Phase 2 (middle 50 percent of time): share with others who are also locked out about your character’s imaginings, prompted by the notifications and trying to compensate for the imagined problems—thereby making things worse.

Phase 3 (final 30 percent of time): continue your characters’ personal stories while collaborating with others to figure out why all have been locked out and develop a plan of action.

The visual component of #BehindYourBak is called the “PostEarYour”:

Tweet a PostEarYour—or shot of your character from behind their back. Let others speculate on what your character was doing. (Keep it PG, nothing sexual or inappropriate please. Use original photos only, no faces.)
Can netprov story lines be more detailed than that?

At almost the same time as Mark and his collaborators were producing the LA Flood Project, I was making my own first attempt to piece together all the elements of the as-yet-unnamed form of netprov on a website titled Chicago Soul Exchange. I described the basic premise of the 2010 project this way:

“Chicago Soul Exchange is a week-long collaboration predicated on the assertion that there are more human beings alive today than the sum total of human beings who have lived before, making it arithmetically impossible for everyone now to have a past life. We posit a secondary market in past lives that sells quality past lives (which turn out to be difficult to harvest) to the highest bidder in online auctions. Chicago Soul Exchange the company is a small, plucky, Ma-and-Pa start-up in the industry.

“Chicago Soul Exchange—Yes, you can have a better past! At competitive prices!”

The characters were workshopped and created in advance, instead of emerging from play. The central character, PastLifeMaven, played by Jean Sramek, described herself as

a veteran of office politics and underappreciation who, when faced at age 40 with a diagnosis of squamous licatropha (benign!) decided . . . to drop all the trivia and dedicate my life to doing what I want to do hardest—matching up short-changed folks of the present day with the dash- ing past lives they most deserve!

PastLifeMaven’s best friend SpiritualEssence was played by Margi Preus, and I played a trio of characters created to advance the plot: ChadBonner, a suave but sketchy past-life “harvester”; VladtheWholesaler, a nefarious Russian past-life-dealing competitor; and N. Michael Barrington, attorney for the shadowy Credit Liechtenstein Caribe Investment Group. Other players wrote short descriptions of lives for sale and bid on listed lives.

The scenario for Chicago Soul Exchange was this: far from containing the glamorous heroines and heroes everyone wants as past lives, the catalog is full of nondescript agricultural workers, most of whom died young. As the week begins, PastLifeMaven announces that ChadBonner has
brought her a hot property, an actual medieval English knight, Swidhelm! A bidding war ensues. Vlad the Wholesaler appears, offering an elevated fee for a quick purchase. But Spiritual Essence has already snapped up Swidhelm. Vlad ups his pressure to sell. Spiritual Essence reports the physical presence of Swidhelm in her kitchen, which sets off a rip-roaring metaphysical debate among customers: Can past lives have their own bodies? Vlad’s offers turn into threats of a hostile buyout. Swidhelm’s wife appears in Spiritual Essence’s kitchen, hopping mad.

Just as Vlad is set to pounce, Credit Liechtenstein Caribe Investment Group, acting as agent for unnamed industry giants, sweeps in to buy Chicago Soul Exchange, along with Swidhelm, and close it down. We were exploring psychological and social issues that were to return in subsequent netprovs: self-acceptance in “as is” condition and the construction of personal identity through cultural and economic shopping.

As the launch of Chicago Soul Exchange approached, I was getting feedback from potential players that some had the time, energy, and interest to play larger roles and others were intimidated by that prospect and wanted a way to be involved mostly as an audience with the opportunity to participate here and there. For the first time, I organized the contributors consciously into lead characters and audience-contributor characters, laying the groundwork for our current system of featured players and players. From Chicago Soul Exchange I learned how to divide a netprov into narrative “beats.” Beat is a term that has several definitions in theater and film. I use it in netprov to indicate the smallest unit of narrative action, usually an exchange of behavior among characters that results in a change.

Try This: Chicago Soul Exchange

Here’s a recipe for having fun with the soul exchange idea:

1. With three to ten friends, pick a social media platform of choice. Play for one month.
2. Each player writes twenty entries for the Catalog of Past Lives.
3. Each entry in the Catalog of Past Lives must consist of two sentences, maximum. (Horrible, isn’t it—summarizing a life in two sentences? Then why so often does it make us laugh?)
4. Use your own knowledge of history and of life today to make realistic descriptions of past lives. Avoid the temptation to populate
the past with novelistic or cinematic lead characters. Draw from an imaginary but realistic, random selection of past lives.

5. Once your catalog items are posted, bid and haggle over them as on an online auction site.

6. Invent and share with players your own narrative shape; for example:
   - Week 1: Theme: dissatisfaction with your own life
   - Week 2: Idealization of your newly acquired past lives
   - Week 3: Gradual disappointment with your newly acquired past lives
   - Week 4: Grudging acceptance of your own life

If you have predetermined characters and a scenario, it isn’t really improvised, is it?

There is a distinction between what I would call “pure improv,” where all the action is improvised such as Del Close and Charna Halpern’s Improv Olympics in Chicago, and hybrids of memorized sketch comedy and improv such as the Second City in Chicago and Toronto and the Groundlings in Los Angeles. A typical Chicago Second City stage show will have approximately 80 percent memorized material and 20 percent improvised segments.

Character-based sketch comedy is developed in many different ways. Sometimes they are done in the classic playwriting method: the writer sitting at home and writing out an entire sketch or a group of writers sitting around the writers’ table. As often though, a basic idea is brought to a private improv rehearsal session and workshoped by a group of writer-actors. And sometimes new ideas come straight out of these rehearsal sessions themselves.

Another good example of a narrative trellis is the netprov Mem-Eraze, where events were designed to build up toward a highly charged family reunion. A website in the visual micropublishing platform Tumblr gave this invitation:

“Mem-Eraze is an online support group for those who lost their online social scrapbooks in the Mem-or-Eaze Inc. server fire and bankruptcy.”
The page went on to posit a visual culture that had grown up in this support group:

“Recovering from the shock of losing all their family photos and despairing of being able to recreate past travels and past reunions, members of the Mem-Eraze support group begin to reconstruct family history using images of everyday objects—for one family the salt and pepper shakers become grandpa and grandma, soup spoons are the kids, teaspoons are the grandkids. They lay out in the Summer of 2014 on the napkin-beach by the tablecloth-sea. The family stories emerge vividly nonetheless. In part a cautionary tale about entrusting our family archives and family narratives to online corporations—when will the first catastrophic loss of data occur?—this netprov harnesses the expressive power of the highly developed contemporary art form of snapshot-and-caption.”

Try This: Mem-Eraze

Here’s a way to play this fun, visual netprov:

1. Group players into a single family of three to five or multiple families of three to five.

2. Have players create characters that are organized randomly into large, extended players; meet in real life to outline shared elements of family history.

3. Have players then reconstruct vanished family photos supposedly lost in the server fire by photographing small, common objects in improvised tabletop scenes, captioning them and posting them by hashtag. (Try to use generic, nonanthropomorphic objects without visible logos and photograph them from low angles, composing images visually reminiscent of family photos. Using similar objects for the same characters creates an amazing sense of family resemblance.)

4. As players collaboratively create a family history, look for stories to extend, amplify, or tell from another perspective. Foreground feuds, alliances, and suspicions.

5. Play is organized around a highly charged family reunion near the end of the time period, at which the dynamics previously established are enacted acutely.
6. Invent and share with players your own narrative shape, for example:

- Week 1: Theme: grief over the loss of the family archives; beginning to retell stories
- Week 2: Polite disagreement over past events
- Week 3: Open argument about past events; preparations for the big family reunion
- Week 4: The family reunion: preparations, travel, the live event; the aftermath: debriefings from multiple perspectives

So, story lines can be kind of general or very specific?

Correct. The 2012 netprov Last Five Days of Sight and Sound had a specific story line. It was inspired by the increasing sensual focus—tunnel vision—on smartphones. Players imagine they have completely lost their vision and hearing. They are patients at an experimental clinic where surgeons under the direction of the mysterious Dr. Vossergon have connected their brains directly to the internet. As Mark and I wrote:

“You begin to explore your temporary media-only world and experiment with communicating with fellow patients through Twitter. You eagerly await the second surgery that will restore your vision and hearing. But it emerges that Dr. Vossergon has disappeared and can’t be located. Nurse Zink informs you that the connection to sights and sounds through the internet can only last five more days without the second surgery; without it you will forever lose sight and sound. What will you do with your last days of mediated seeing and hearing? You are invited to write about what you most love to see and hear. With one day to go, a last-ditch solution is created. If you can coordinate with other players in an elaborate, precisely-timed daisy-chain—everyone retweets the same set of messages within 5 minutes—you can keep your vision and hearing. Can you do it?”

Try This: Last Five Days of Sight and Sound

Here’s the recipe for a netprov with lots of potential for physical acting, based on the premise above:

1. Identify two to nine players.
2. Day 1: Begin tweeting and exploring your new world, which you can perceive only through screen and headphones.

3. Day 2: Perform some real-life experiments with sensory deprivation (safely!). If you can be in the same space as another player, you can try partner physical activities. Activities include brushing teeth, dancing under a blanket, and passing a water bottle across a room to a thirsty player with your heads covered by a coat or blanket, using only screen and headphone communication.

4. End of day 2: The announcement that you all have five days of mediated sight and sound left. Share your priorities. React to others’ priorities. Help other players experience life priorities via your phones.

5. Day 6: A way out—an online endgame—is invented and agreed to by players. The endgame could be garnering X number of votes from nonplayers on a post in an hour, or all players posting an image of a randomly chosen object within an hour, or the composition of a collaborative sonnet in three minutes or less.

6. Day 7: Play the endgame.

How do you do a story line netprov with a lot of players?

Fantasy Automated Investor’s League (F.A.I.L.), from 2012, was inspired by the complex collaboration fantasy sports leagues in which online players compete with remixed, imaginary teams made of real-life players and their real-life statistics. Mark and I played the three imaginary CEOs, and players, including students, played their workers. The tight scenario for this netprov began with this invitation:

“Dan, Lisa and Consuela banter constantly in Twitter. They are busy, single salesfolk who keep their college friendship alive by teasing each other about their fantasy league. But rather than playing fantasy sports, they are die-hard members of the Fantasy Automated Investors League (F.A.I.L.) in which they are CEOs of imaginary businesses. They wheel, deal, joke and trash talk, and we learn that (in real life) Consuela is being promoted to corporate stardom, Lisa dreams of marriage and kids (perhaps with Dan), and Dan’s career is going down the tubes.”

172 NETPROV
Once the basic fictional world is established in tweets among the trio who imagine themselves to be alone, a surprise is in store that will change lives together.

“First, Consuela attempts a sudden merger of her powerful fantasy company with depressed Dan’s failing one—a merger with decidedly romantic overtones—sending lively Lisa into a jealous tailspin. Consuela’s move violates not only the unspoken rules of the game but also the delicate balance of their relationships.

Second, the three CEOs discover that these are not merely fantasy businesses. Suddenly, disgruntled, real-life employees begin to surface in Twitter, furious at Dan about the merger and its resultant layoffs and plant closings. It turns out the three have unwittingly become ensnared in a Wall Street scheme that creates real corporations and hires real employees managed remotely with digital aloofness by unsuspecting armchair CEOs. The two plots weave toward a wild double dénouement. What matters more, the friendships or the workers? Does love triumph? Who gets final bragging rights? Stay glued to your twitter feeds and find out!”

In *Invisible Rendezvous*, I wrote about fantasy sports leagues as a model of remixing given cultural elements into creative weaves. I still think it is a useful alternative cultural model to the old one-way broadcasting model and a great image of how fan fiction, social media comments threads, and netprov work.

Some netprovs are designed to allow open-ended play within a planned story line system. Digital artist Joellyn Rock put together a collaboration between herself, multimedia composer Kathy McTavish, and me at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Rock’s inspiration was drawn from literature:

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino describes his imaginary Sophronia, made up of two half-cities, part circus and part stone. For the dusk-to-dawn event, Joellyn Rock created over two hours of colorful mashup video projections on circus themes with a digital age spin. In the spirit of carnivalesque celebrations, the audience plays along with silhouettes of Multifficient the Multi-tasker, Textana the Texted Girl, Connectiva the Cord Charmer, Pollinatrix the Pollinator, and the Amazing Dr Calvino.
Figure 1. Sophronia, interactive digital installation with live Twitter netprov feed, installed at the Walker Art Center, 2014. Joellyn Rock, Kathy McTavish. Photo: Joellyn Rock.

Figure 2. Sophronia, interactive digital installation with live Twitter netprov feed, installed at the Walker Art Center, 2014.

Visitors to the Sophronia room were dazzled by Rock’s glowing circus tent, the walls of which glowed with digital video, set in a cavernous room with McTavish’s graphics sliding slowly across all the walls, punctuated by live tweets drawn into McTavish’s system via their hashtag. Rock described the interactivity:

The collaborative project offers both physical and virtual space where participants may spin their own stories of Sophronia. In the multimedia installation, the audience has various modes for participation. The glowing space invites a mischievous mix of digital video and live silhouettes, colors and sounds, texts and bodies in motion. Visitors may enter the circus tent, using props and costume elements to embody the characters of Sophronia. Or they may use mobile devices to enter the project.
twitter feed at #sophroniatwo and watch the text projections wash the walls with crowd-sourced story fragments (see figures 1 and 2).

Rock’s 2015 collaborative installation *FISHNETSTOCKINGS*, which premiered in Bergen, Norway, offered netprov participants a chance to play with variations on a classic fairy tale, *The Little Mermaid*. The project, Rock wrote,

is inspired and informed by historical mermaid legends and their myriad literary variants. Both cautionary and emboldening, mermaid tales inhabit the blurred boundary between childhood longing and adulthood regret. In variants of the little mermaid tale, we find a story of the passage between worlds.

Players participated by tweeting to different hashtags, which would group tweets into a narrative sequence and display them in real time, floating and flowing through the giant wall projection of the project that combined video, live interaction triggered through an Xbox Kinect motion detection system, and the live tweets (see figures 3 and 4). Rock’s narrative frame was evocative, powerful, and open-ended:

FISHNET Act I: Innocence & Curiosity, the tale’s beginning, when little mermaid is living with her family in her underwater palace, longing for a view of the upperworld.

Act II: Stormy Seas, Shipwreck & Rescue, when the mermaid encounters the prince on his ship, their worlds collide and a stormy shipwreck leads to a rescue.

Act III: Bad Bargains & Good Exchange Rates, when the mermaid sacrifices her tail, loses her voice, and reinvents herself in the fishmarket. It’s
your turn to voice alternative endings to the bad bargains made by little mermaids.

In 2013, reality show stars Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag reached out to Mark Marino again, wanting to see if he and I could cook up a new netprov for them. Mark and I had been musing about what we called a “magic door” netprov where we would make a casual joke about some preposterous organization, then open the magic door to reveal an already-existing, elaborate, carefully crafted website about that organization and launch into a netprov. We imagined one fine Thursday night in October when, suddenly, Spencer and Heidi’s official Twitter accounts and a core group of fans would begin live-Tweeting episode 3 of their new TV show SpeidiShow, a show no one had ever heard of, a show that, as its elaborate professional website stated plainly, was imaginary. “Although the show’s website posts previews and recaps for each episode,” wrote Myles Tanzer on BuzzFeed, “there’s no actual production of a web series. . . . ‘Netprov basically extends what ‘reality stars’ do all the time—only it allows the fans to help tell the story,’ Pratt told BuzzFeed via email.”

We prepared an overall narrative arc that involved Spencer and Heidi gradually freeing themselves from the manipulations of their fictional reality show overlords all while they participated in an increasingly absurd set of adventures. The weekly topics evolved from typical reality show fare—”Europe on $0.00 a Day,” “Speidi, Cater My Wedding!,” and “Cutthroat Yoga: Don’t Throw a Fitsperation”—to other genres: “Who stole the bees?” (an investigative reporting adventure) and the ghost hunting of Halloween’s “Celebrity Haunted House” (see figure 5).
What if I want to make a really detailed netprov scenario?

I can’t wait to see what you’re cooking up! One of the most elaborate netprov scenarios was the one for Grace, Wit & Charm.

Each beat was three days long and on any given day of the two-week run, one beat was beginning, one beat was peaking, and one beat was concluding. Beats that occurred on the two Wednesday nights of live theater performance were subdivided into more beats for the stage production. In addition to these subplots, the characters responded daily to problems submitted by readers.

The scenario of Grace, Wit & Charm was as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

7) Social Engineering
NEIL is called in to help a group of social media friends that has an awkwardness; he hacks TwitFace “just a touch” to rearrange some friendship networks. NEIL’s hacking has set into motion a socially cataclysmic series of events threatening to ruin dozens of real life relationships; the whole team consults to help him out. NEIL solves the TwitFace social problem by inventing an imaginary person, whom he is now doomed to play forever.

8) First Tele-Surgery
DEB’s business relationship with Virtu-Kare leads to a trial contract for a couple of tele-surgeries to come in the next few days; SONNY is morally appalled. DEB charges ahead with plans for the surgery; recruits SONNY as the “hands” by flattering his Radio Controlled Model Snow-mobile vanity. DEB leads the first tele-surgery, with DEB doing visuals and SONNY doing hands, is a great success!
9) The Double Surgery
SONNY accepts another surgery, a carpal tunnel job, at first reluctantly and then with more enthusiasm. NEIL catches wind of the carpal tunnel surgery scheduled for Tuesday; he needs the same surgery but can’t afford it, since SmoothMoovesTM doesn’t offer health care. SONNY and DEB perform carpal tunnel surgery on a client while LAURA attempts to mimic the same operation on NEIL, onstage, with their hands in a pillowcase (see figure 6).

Figure 6. LAURA, left (Shannon Szymkowiak), begins to perform live, onstage carpal-tunnel-surgery-in-a-bag on NEIL, second from left (Jamie Harvie), in imitation of DEB and SONNY’s tele-surgery. Photo: Joellyn Rock.

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

11) White Lie Therapy
NEIL uneasily finds himself doing online medical consulting and de-facto psychotherapy. Placebo therapy only works if the patient believes an authoritative doctor who claims the treatment is legitimate. NEIL’s truth-telling hesitation undermines the process. He loses the confidence of a patient. DEB coaches NEIL on how to be an authoritative placebo doc.
12) Choosing the Prize
SONNY leads a discussion: Our team is now in the lead for the company-wide incentive prize; they can choose between a vacation in Ocean Shores, Mississippi (hardest hit by the BP oil spill) or a retirement savings plan; it must be a consensus, everyone must agree; Sonny argues for the retirement plan; DEB agrees. SONNY despairs as NEIL and LAURA rhapsodize over the vacation; DEB and SONNY argue for the retirement savings. Deb and Sonny both join the vacation; yayyy, deficit spending! Yayyy living for the now!

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

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

15) Last Words
SONNY leads as Virtu-Kare begins to assign the team hospice, end-of-life challenges; they spend the last few moments with clients DEB is called into one of the most dreaded of all challenges: texting/chatting to someone in his/her deathbed on behalf of a squeamish relative. THE TEAM joins to say goodbye to a client who was a heavy web user; the team joins to say goodbye to the audience; the last words of the netprov and the last words to the client are the same; the value of a life lived partially virtually SONNY delivers a Last Words statement that both serves the needs of the client and also serves as a summation of the project.