Netprov

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CHAPTER 10.

FUTURES OF NETPROV

Laughter, Insight, Empathy

I’m excited by the possible futures of netprov. I see a rollicking, rolling playing field in which writers of all skill levels can invent together and learn from one another. I see a satisfying creative outlet that busy people can participate in using tiny slices of time in everyday life. I see players feeling the rewards of cocreating large, smart, substantial works of art.

Technologically, I see netprov continuing to migrate as parody and satire from platform to platform as new platforms appear. Organizationally, if money were no object, I would form a small netprov production studio and employ a couple of netrunners, a handful of featured players, a programmer, a designer, and a production assistant or two. I’d create a simple, proprietary platform—essentially a private web forum—and invite groups of around three to ten friends to form private netprov groups among themselves, free from trolls. The studio would provide the trellis for a new netprov every calendar month, sent to all the groups. Each group would see in their feed their own and their friends’ posts, intermingled with the featured players’ posts which would be sent to everyone from headquarters, providing models and inspiration. Eventually, stellar groups might nominate themselves to be published to the wider community and other forms of sharing might be developed.

What do you think are the strongest characteristics you’ve discovered in netprov that can make real works of art?

Hey! Hi! Great to see you!
Hi! Yeah, sorry I couldn’t be here for the last chapter. Did I miss anything good?

Nah. I was just worried about you!

It was the darndest thing. I was just cutting these organic carrots I get in our food box and—wham!—there goes a big chunk of my thumb!

Ouch!

It’s fine now but I had to go to urgent care for stitches. As you were saying?

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

Laughter, insight, empathy?

Silly as netprovs can be, the laughter we seek is the laughter of insight. Psychological insight is the sudden understanding of the causes of one’s disorder. Satire is psychological insight operating in a community.

Self-important new-media forms simply beg to be satirized, with all the comic consequences we’ve discussed. The question is: How truthful are these new forms and platforms? They often aim to be business “disruptors” and wind up disrupting human relationships as well. What unique parts of inner truth do they reveal and which do they conceal? Perhaps this ridicule provides a social function of publicly putting the new forms through their paces so that they are not taken too seriously.
An African consultant on an educational publishing project I was working on once described how West African Anansi the Spider folk stories were used in her family. Grandmothers and aunts were very observant about the behavior of the little kids. If one youngster was having problems sharing, sure enough, that night at story time, one of the elders would tell an Anansi story about sharing. Everyone in the intergenerational group would know who was being talked about, but the storytelling was never intended to shame or blame, just a reminder and encouragement. I believe netprov can use networked communication to function in society in just this way. Netprov has the potential to be not just creative entertainment but an art form that not only offers critical insight on society but also offers real opportunities for community building and new friendships.

Laughter, however, can cut two ways. It can be either mean-spirited or it can be generous and empathic. From the roots of improv theater, netprov can learn the power of empathic comedy. Del Close was an empathy junkie. Close’s writing points us toward agreement as a process and connection as the goal.

Netprov as literature-based “show” offers the possibility of cocreation of insightful, healing satire that is as deep as the novels of the past. Netprov as “game” offers the possibility of new, empathic, real-life relationships based on collaborative creativity and genuine understanding. I believe the world a netprov narrative can offer its participants is their own everyday world—transformed by laughter, insight, and empathy.

**How could you transform the world with netprov?**

In the book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Law School’s Negotiation Project follow up on the group’s bestselling *Getting to Yes* with clear and practical advice for moving beyond personal and social standoffs. “We will show you how to turn the damaging battle of warring messages,” they write, “into the more constructive approach we call a learning conversation.”

**How would a book from the Harvard Law School program help point to the future of a new art form?**

Well, learning conversation already sounds a lot like a generic description of a netprov, for starters. And they go on to say, “Each difficult conversation is really three conversations.” There is the what happened conversa-
tion, the feelings conversation, and the identity conversation (What does this conflict say about my identity and my status?), conflicting stories, feelings, identities? That’s literature in a nutshell, right? In fact, they say, “Difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings.” And how do the authors propose proceeding? They say simply, “Stop arguing about who’s right. Explore each other’s stories.”

They point out that we each have different information and therefore see the world differently. Therefore, in a phrase that would be right at home in a stage improv class, they encourage us to “move from certainty to curiosity” and to adopt what they call “the And stance.” Sound familiar? It’s the same and as the “yes, and” of improv:

Don’t choose between the stories; embrace both. That’s the And stance.

The And stance is based on the assumption that the world is complex, that you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged, and they can feel just as hurt, angry and wronged. They can be doing their best and you can think that its not good enough. You may have done something stupid, and they will have contributed in important ways to the problem as well. You can feel furious with them, and you can also feel love and appreciation for them.

The authors’ encouragement to replace blame with a model of contribution—What did each party contribute to the situation?—prompts strategies that could come straight from the guidelines for a netprov:

**Role Reversal**

As yourself “What would they say I’m contributing?” Pretend you are the other person and answer the question in the first person, using pronouns such as I, me, and my.

**The Observer’s Insight**

Step back and look at the problem from the perspective of a disinterested observer. Imagine that you are a consultant called in to help the people in this situation better understand why they are getting stuck. If you have trouble getting out of your own shoes in this way, ask a friend to try for you. If what your friend comes up with surprises you, don’t reject it immediately... how could that be and what would it mean?

The observer’s insight exercise becomes one of the authors’ key gestures, to create a Third story. “In addition to your story and the other person’s story, every difficult conversation includes an invisible Third Story. The
Third Story is the one a keen observer would tell, someone with no stake in your particular problem.” A fiction writer, perhaps?

Most similar of all to improv and netprov is the encouragement of the authors of Difficult Conversations, encouragement that the most helpful skill in collaborative problem solving is listening. They write, “You can’t move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood. And they won’t feel heard and understood until you’ve listened.” And this is from people whose job it is to drop in as consultants to volatile workplaces and help them learn to work together.

You think netprov can help people listen?

The watchword of all stage improv is listening. Without listening, improv doesn’t work. The same goes for netprov; without reading carefully—tuning in to the emotional resonance of what others’ characters are writing—you can’t really play netprov. Thermophiles in Love offered a playful learning conversation about gender in a way that, as larpwright Samara Hayley Steele realized, could expand minds and offer insights in a game-like setting. What if groups of players from across the great social and political divides of our time could tell their stories in a playful environment that required us each to walk a mile in another’s shoes?

Could there be learning conversations that make the same gesture as the final sequence of Grace, Wit & Charm, where the overworked, overstressed Character Enhancement Agents found themselves saving insurance companies zillions by performing remote hospice care in a sequence that was a sharp satire of America’s health-care system as well as a good-bye to their player-audience of two weeks? Despite the absurdity of their task, the team gave it their best shot:

Grace, Wit & Charm, @GWandC May 29, 2011
WAIT!! Wait, team! Sorry. Sorry. (Before departing for your virtual vacation) One more VirtuKare hospice job before you go, OK? Patient is already on the line. #GWandC

Sonny, @Sonny1SoBlue May 29, 2011
OK. We’ll take it together. “Hello ma’am. How are you? Well, that was a silly question wasn’t it? You’re dying, that’s how you are.” #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 29, 2011
Ma’am, I am powerful in this world, & the next, & I can assure you have nothing to fear from passing through the twilight doorway. #GWandC
Neil, @Neil_GWaC May 29, 2011
Ma’am Ill move for you like you used to move as a girl. See me? Feel it? Your body is all in your mind. Zumba with me, dear. #GWandC

Sonny, @Sonny1SoBlue May 29, 2011
Believe it or not, I’m looking forward to this Wolfstonecastlebane vacation! Laura? Neil? Can you guys program me some snowmobiles? #GWandC

Deb, @Deb_GWaC May 29, 2011
Ma’am I can make the pain go away, see. I know your allone with no family there, but there are four of us here with you now. #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 29, 2011
Yes, Sonny, my Wolfstonecastlebane temple is a place to rest, recreate, recover. Sure, we’ll build you a whole snowmobile course! #GWandC

Sonny, @Sonny1SoBlue May 29, 2011
Ma’am life is good, but so death must be good, too. I promise, yes I promise. #GWandC

Neil, @Neil_GWaC May 29, 2011
I think we’re really helping this dying lady, team. This is kind cool! #GWandC

Deb, @Deb_GWaC May 29, 2011
Now that my son’s cold turkey off his Leaping Lizards video game, can he come to Wolfstonecastlebane with us for a few days? @Laura_GWaC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 29, 2011
Sure, Deb! Your son is welcome! #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 29, 2011
We’re right here with you Ma’am. Glad to be with you. #GWandC

Deb, @Deb_GWaC May 29, 2011
Sure it’s OK to let go Ma’am. You’ve fought a good fight. You have our permission to go! We love you. What’s not to love? #GWandC
Sonny, @Sonny1SoBlue May 29, 2011
Ma’am, hello? Are you there Ma’am? Can you read these Tweets? Do you read me? Do you read us? #GWandC

Laura, @Laura_GWaC May 29, 2011
I think that’s it. #GWandC