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## ARTICLE

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# What world are you from? Learning from the transmedia roots of netprov

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## Abstract

The present article explores a range of netprov projects, a hybrid art form that uses available technologies in transmedia combinations to support improvised role-playing and the creation of fictional narratives in real time. From the implementation of an Air-B-N-Me experience, we present the results of our aim to use time-tested tricks from literary, theatre, game and other creative traditions. Our research aims to reject the compartmentalisation of creative tradition into silos, something that takes place even within individuals.

## Keywords

netprov, transmedia worlds, transdisciplinary collaborations, electronic writing, participatory culture

*¿De qué mundo vienes? Aprendiendo de las raíces transmediales de netprov*

## Resumen

*Este artículo explora una serie de proyectos de netprov, una forma de arte híbrida que utiliza tecnologías disponibles en las combinaciones transmediales como soporte para juegos de rol improvisados y para crear narrativas ficticias en tiempo real. A partir de la implementación de una Experiencia Air-B-N-Me, presentamos los resultados de nuestro objetivo de usar trucos probados en el tiempo partiendo de la tradición literaria, teatral y lúdica y de otras tradiciones creativas. El objetivo de nuestra investigación es, por lo tanto, rechazar la compartimentalización de la tradición creativa en silos que se produce incluso a nivel individual.*

## Palabras clave

*netprov, mundos transmediales, colaboraciones transdisciplinarias, escritura electrónica, cultura participativa*

## 1. Introduction

“What if everyone was back in high school, including you?” read the invitation to participate in the Twitter-based netprov All-Time High. My collaborator Mark C. Marino and I have been producing netprov projects that aim to use time-tested tricks from literary, theatre, game and other creative traditions to create netprovs that are both fun and meaningful, combining the delight of a participatory play and the power of skilled art-making.

Netprov is a widely practiced, hybrid art form that uses available technologies in transmedia combinations to support improvised role playing and the creation of fictional narratives in real time. Netprovs range from individual parody Twitter accounts, such as The Dark Lord @Lord\_Voldemort7, Fake George RR Martin @FakeRRMartin and Not Mark Zuckerberg @notzuckerberg, to the Facebook group Generic Office Roleplay.<sup>1</sup>

“Play the game: leap through a Twitter wormhole to #ATH15, a collaborative lucid dream!” started our netprov invitation for “Join us in the halls of All-Time High, either as your former self or an historical figure!” During the month of July 2015, an international collection of writers used fake Twitter accounts and the netprov hashtag to relive and redeem their teenage experience. Co-creators Claire Donato, Jeff T. Johnson, Mark C. Marino and I designated each week for a key passage of high school life: The Talent Show, The Big Game, The Big Dance and Graduation. Player/writers could contribute any time, but weekly, hour-long live events focused writing energy on the big events and were breathless and hilarious creative experiences.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Air-B-N-Me experience

The 2016 netprov Air-B-N-Me was based on a membership website that made this simple metaphysical proposition: “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 life swapping. 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 life swapping community”.

Following the basic fictional premise of “life swapping”, Air-B-N-Me player/members created characters who posted unused moments of their lives for use by others. The description of the moments provided vivid and humorous sketches of the characters, from bored suburban kids to a hired assassin. Players used mobile phone video

to create short videos purporting to be random moments from visits into another person’s body and life.

For All-Time High and Air-B-N-Me, like all our netprovs, we drew our core participants – our ‘featured players’ – from all walks of life, but in particular from other creative fields. While studying on the Master in Digital Culture programme at the University of Bergen, I identified five main fields that draw creators into netprov: literature, theatre, mass media (film and TV), digital games and the born-digital world of internet, personal media (eg, text messages, email) and social media.

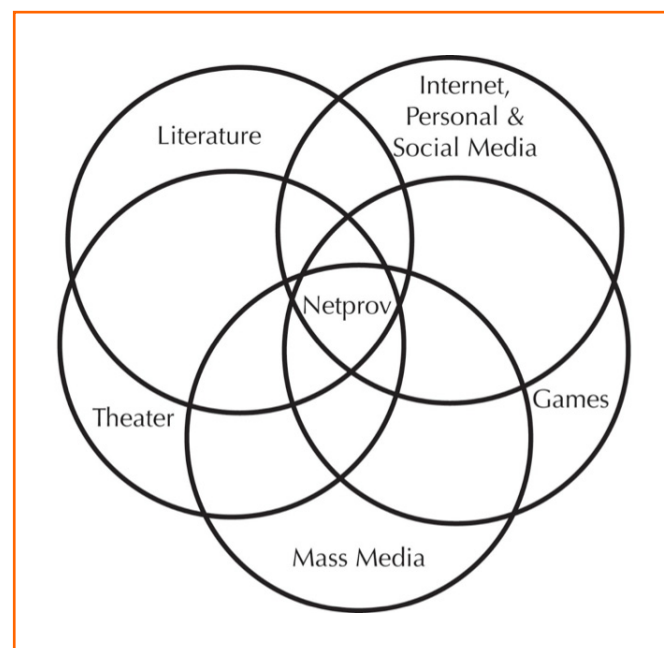


Image 1. Main fields that draw creators into netprov

In transdisciplinary collaborations such as these, one is always encountering talented creators whose assumptions, training and traditions differ widely from those of one’s own field of expertise, one’s own ‘world’. For example, take the seemingly simple question of when a week-long Twitter-based netprov is ‘finished’. Those from the theatre world are likely to assume that once the week is over, the work is over; it was an ephemeral performance and is now only a pleasant memory. At the same time, theatre people would say that the same exact work could always be restaged many times for new participants in a repeat performance, like a play. For those from a literary background, the work is only half-complete; a draft has been composed, but it has yet to be edited, designed and published. And literary folk would never think to repeat the process. Literary works

1. Visit: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/GenericOfficeRoleplay/>>.

2. Visit: <<http://meanwhilenetprov.com/ath15/>, <https://twitter.com/hashtag/ath15>>.

are only composed once. Creators from the world of mass media might suggest that the work is done, but it is only episode one of a possible series of works in which the story continues. Creators from the game world might suggest that the same exact version of the work could be replayed many times by the same participants, until the work is made obsolete by a newer, more technologically advanced version on a better platform, whereupon the first version is effectively “finished”.

Over the years, when new collaborators join a netprov my first question has become: “what world are you from?” Contained in this question are the practical questions: how do you create things in your world? What can we learn from your world to make netprovs better?

This compartmentalisation of creative tradition into silos takes place even within individuals. I love the everyday, conversational metaphor of the ‘hat’, used to represent a subcultural mindset or a social role. In netprov meetings you’ll often hear statements such as: “With my writer hat on I’m wanting time to revise each post. With my theatre-improv hat on I’m feeling we should just post the raw stuff; ‘first thought, best thought’”.

One of my favourite examples of where my own blindness as a person trained in the literary tradition was revealed came at the Electronic Literature Organization conference in Bergen, in 2015, where I participated in a workshop run by Otso Huopaniemi. He shared a fascinating and funny netprov-like project that he called Live Writing. Huopaniemi had actors, in a nightclub setting, tell a story together using speech-to-text software, which was projected behind them. In their game, they were compelled to incorporate the inevitable speech-to-text transcription errors into the unfolding narrative, with hilarious results. In the question period afterwards, Huopaniemi mentioned the word ‘rehearsal’ as part of the process. I was stunned. As someone from the writing and design world, the very idea was foreign to me. Our netprov group had never rehearsed! “How much rehearsal?” I asked. They had long rehearsals four or five nights a week for several weeks, as one would when preparing a play! What a good idea, I thought! Since then, we have built rehearsal time into every new netprov.

What I want to do here is to sketch out a systematic rubric with which to compare what creators bring into the experimental, digital netprov space from various worlds. This exploration is not intended to be a rigorous critical analysis of these complex fields: that is far beyond my expertise. It is intended to be of pragmatic use to creators asking how can we make better art, better netprovs? How can we improve transdisciplinary collaborations? I hope it may also offer scholars and critics some useful starting points.

### 3. A system for examining the assumptions of creative fields

We look at these different creative worlds according to these categories: (1) Composition, (2) Gatekeeping, (3) Production, (4)

Invitation, (5) Offering, (6) Use, (7) Credit, (8) Success and (9) Archiving.

*Composition* refers to how and by whom the raw intellectual property of the work is created; is it solitary, collaborative, bureaucratic? *Gatekeeping* covers the resources necessary to bring work to an audience; how specialised and expensive is the delivery technology and who approves the expenditure? *Production* concerns the trades, processes and subcultures involved in transforming raw intellectual property into the requisite public form; how does the work go from ‘raw’ to ‘cooked’? *Invitation* is the set of traditions for informing the audience that a new work is available; I’m a fan, what’s new in this medium? *Offering* is the public physical form of the work; what do I get for my investment of time and money? *Use* is the expected audience interaction with the work; where do I go, how should I behave, where do I begin, how long does it last, when am I done? *Credit* is what the public is told about who created the work; who made this, how do I get more of the same? *Success* is a broad consideration of what constitutes success and failure for a work and for a creator; how many people like this, am I a success in my field? *Archiving* is about what becomes of a work in the long run; I’ve heard about this piece, how do I get hold of it?

Then I will look at the creator/user relationship in each world to explore where responsibility for the experience (whom to blame if you don’t enjoy the work) lies. Lastly, I will indicate which elements from each world have found their way into the netprovs that Mark C. Marino and I produce. This exploration is highly subjective. I begin with literature because that is Mark’s and my own home world. Of course, I also see the other worlds through this filter; apologies in advance for my misconceptions.

Those who find their way into the commons of netprov are most often experimentalists within their fields, but are usually still marked by their traditional education and youthful ambitions, the mainstream standards of success in their home fields. A lifelong experimentalist myself, I still feel twinges of bizarre and unfounded regret for not having had the success as a novelist that I craved in my teens. Radically experimental media folk I know still half-pine for Hollywood glory. Therefore, I define my characterisations here as attempting to represent foundational, more mainstream assumptions in each creative field, sometimes invisible to practitioners, that emerge from formal education and apprenticeship.

#### 3.1. The world of literature

In the world of literature, *Composition* is generally solitary, with some overt collaboration, and some unacknowledged collaboration (from editors, friends, lovers, spouses). *Gatekeeping* in literary publishing still echoes the 18<sup>th</sup> century printer/publisher/bookseller model; the cost of production and warehousing of books makes publishers classic gatekeepers, and editorial boards arbiters of taste. In America, the corporatisation of publishing in the 1970s replaced the older system

that used pop culture bestsellers to finance 'quality' work with an expectation that every work makes a profit. *Production* in literature is graphic design; all functions are now performed on the same machine: a personal computer. *Invitation* in literature is done by currying reviews, some advertising. Book review websites and retailer book reviews exist alongside the traditional journalistic reviews. The publisher organises this effort and the author does a lot of the work in appearances and readings. *Offering*, in literary terms, is a single, fixed work. Published works of fiction are rarely revised. *Use*, by cultural agreement, is assumed to be solo, silent reading of the complete text, in order. Of course, actual usage varies widely. *Credit* goes to the fiction author. There are 'dedications' in fiction works, but rarely 'acknowledgements', as in non-fiction. Cited text and images made by others are, by tradition, clearly credited. *Success* is demonstrated by sales, reviews and inclusion in the body of canonical works taught in universities. *Archiving* is a great strength of this tradition. Since ancient times, libraries have been thoughtful repositories of work and contemporary librarianship along with visual art's museology are the great archival systems of our culture.

The creator/user relationship follows patterns established in the ancient world and put into their modern form in the Romantic era: author as exceptional person with exceptional vision and skill. In a successful instance, the users' role is to admire and keep a respectful distance at book signings and readings. Responsibility for the experience is largely laid at the author's door: the author must communicate. But, as it touches netprov people, there is the notable exception of a modernist/avant-gardist tradition, shared by visual art, that puts the blame on the unsatisfied user for philistinism: the reader must work to understand a challenging, experimental piece.

Useful for netprov from the world of literature are the craft of careful composition and the wealth of historic, multicultural narrative strategies that can be transported into new media. The archiving traditions are a great model for all other fields. Less useful, perhaps, are the pampered, self-centred lifestyle role models of narcissistic authors of the past.

### 3.2. The world of theatre

*Composition* of fixed-text plays, particularly in the English tradition, is assumed to be identical to the literary: solitary with some collaboration. Improvised-theatre players generally train together in person and develop material in teams under directors who hold the same decisive power as fixed-text play directors, who creatively shape the production. *Gatekeeping* in the world of live performance has always been about venues: owning, renting, managing and financing theatres. Theatre managers, producers and financier-'angels' provide the facilities and cash and are the decision-makers, with creators competing to get on the schedule. *Production* consists of rehearsals (training together being essential for actors to develop the rapport required for live performance), design of sets, lighting, costumes, stage management, and a fine tradition of parties and celebrations. Netprov is particularly

indebted to the 'theatre games' pedagogy of Viola Spolin (1963), who took what she learned working with children in public programmes in Depression-era, 1930s Chicago, and crafted it into the rich tradition of improv theatre. *Invitation* to theatrical events involves sending press releases to news outlets, buying ads, putting up posters and currying reviews of initial performances. Journalistic outlets often have a recurring Theatre section. The theatre or company management does this work. *Offering* consists of multiple performances of the same piece which, traditionally, are both always the same and forever new. Printed programme notes handed for no extra charge to each user offer historical and cultural context and information about the creators that helps users to understand the performance. *Use* means sitting quietly in the dark along with others, giving the subtle empathic response that is the part the audience plays in the proceedings and, ideally, staying for the whole performance. *Credit* is divided among author, actors and sometimes director and producers. Success is simple and objective: audience response, ticket sales and good reviews. *Archiving* is rare. Union agreements usually forbid any use of video documentation beyond the theatre building. Still photographs may be used for publicity and historic purposes. Performances are considered to be essentially ephemeral and impossible to preserve.

The creator/user relationship in live theatre is based on a fundamental expectation of 'an evening's entertainment'. Even in avant-garde theatre, the expectation is generally that the experience can be challenging, but cannot be boring. Improv-based theatre asks for varying degrees of audience participation. Successful actors, and to a lesser extent authors, develop passionate fan followings. Responsibility for the experience falls squarely on the creators.

Useful for netprov from the world of theatre are the wonderful 'theatre games' of stage improv as originated by Viola Spolin and elaborated by Halpern *et al.* (1994). Originally developed in children's workshops, by the 1940s Spolin had evolved the games into ways of training actors for conventional, fixed-text theatre. By the 1960s, Spolin's games had become an art form in their own right: improv. Spolin's improv is playful, spontaneous and free. It is radically inclusive, spurning conventional, Romantic meritocracies of talent. The opening lines of her influential, 1963 *Improvisation for the Theater* say, stirringly, that: "Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become 'stageworthy'". Spolin and her son Paul Sills, who co-founded Chicago's Second City improv-based theatre, even proposed a radical renegotiation of the relationship between creator and audience by founding the short-lived Games Theater in the mid-1960s in Chicago (2001). The Games Theater required all audience members to join the performance as participants rather than passive observers.

Other, more traditional theatre processes such as rehearsals, workshoping of sketches, and character development are very helpful for impersonating ongoing characters online. Social traditions of cast parties and exuberant encouragement and camaraderie help

leaven the traditional isolation of those from a literary background. Encouraging, too, is continuing grant support for theatre in the US, which could extend to netprov. This contrasts to the virtual non-existence of grants in the US for experimental literary writers. All Mark's and my netprovs have been completely self-funded.

### 3.3. The world of mass media

*Composition* in film and television is centralised, professionalised and collaborative, which is reshaped by complex power-arrays of writers, actors, directors, producers, showrunners, distributors and financiers, and contributed to by numerous designers and technicians. *Gatekeeping*, due to the high cost of production and distribution, is intense and restrictive. Gambling on novelty is kept to a minimum. High production values, visible in the work, clearly indicate the difference between professional and amateur production. *Production* begins with screenwriting, often collaborative, rehearsals and a highly organised sequence of simultaneous pre-production, production and post-production tasks, aiming at serious deadlines. *Invitation* consists of advertising and promotion, often centring around enticing 'trailers', and courting reviewers. The production company and distributors do this work. *Offering* is centred around a single work, considered complete and unalterable, fortified against piracy. Core narrative units are typically the film of 90 to 180 minutes, sequels or series of such films, and the TV-rooted hour-long episodes that combine to form seasons, and then 'shows' comprised of many seasons. Large story worlds also include transmedia satellite offerings, cartoon and book versions and continuations, web and social media extensions, and consumer items from toys to clothing to lunch boxes. *Use* is to watch (solo, with known others, with unknown others) the core offering completely, in a theatre or with a licensed version at home or elsewhere. Current usage of seasons includes 'binge-watching'. Transmedia offerings support and encourage a lifestyle of 'super fans', who create unofficial spin-offs. *Credit* in the world is scrupulous and attempts to be complete. End credits, by industry agreement, name all collaborators in rough order of importance. *Success* is measured by sales and audience metrics, which are publicly known and serve as de facto assessments of value. *Archiving* has become increasingly systematised after decades of casual neglect and the loss of some early films due to chemical deterioration. Fan collections of ephemera provide sources for transmedia scholarship.

The creator/user relationship in the world of mass media has been honed and heightened by nearly a century of Hollywood journalism and promotion. Actors, and to a lesser extent filmmakers and writers, achieve a stratospheric celebrity status. They live in a world that is simultaneously inaccessible and constantly visible. Locks of hair and objects touched by celebrities take on the magic power and value of relics. Users commonly take care to craft careful, thoughtful reactions to works and creators, and these opinions are discussed at length in person, in professional publications and in the informal media. Fictional worlds assume great importance in many users' lives and

they spend time and money in participation and co-creation, from visiting theme parks to creating fan fiction. Responsibility for the experience falls on the creators, sometimes somewhat unfairly on the actors; users understand the actual responsibility for what they see with varying levels of sophistication.

Useful for netprov from the world of mass media are story-world narrative systems and the many modes of transmedia that allow narratives to populate multiple platforms. The subcultures of fan fiction are very similar to netprov's co-creation strategies and very inspiring. Very popular mass media works are among the few common experiences left in the United States of America, and therefore are useful touchstones for satire. Many promotion and publicity methods are useful for netprov: trailers and movie-style posters, for example.

### 3.4. The world of games

*Composition* is usually collaborative, from small teams to large international bureaucracies. Collaborators are frequently located in different places around the globe. *Gatekeeping* in this world is a blend of the literary 'publisher' concept and the mass media 'film studio' model. Just as in mass media, the more money involved, the more conservative the decision-making. *Production* consists of a suite of highly specialised skills, from concept and initial creation, to many flavours of writing, programming and testing. *Invitation* happens via advertisements, reviews and press releases, and on crowdsourced fan sites and review websites. Companies and fans share the workload. *Offering*: games are sold according to retail model as 'units', either a physical object or a one-time download. To buy a game is also to buy updates and bug fixes. Popular games are re-sold periodically as numbered versions, which are considered separate purchase units. Because of the assumed value of technical improvements, the new version is considered experientially superior to the previous version and invalidates it, rather than adding to it or even co-existing with it. Narratives may build from version to version, but earlier versions on earlier platforms cease to be supported and become inaccessible except to scholars and collectors. *Use* of games can be solo, with known others and with unknown others. Time of use is limited only by lack of interest or physical fatigue. Games can be 'finished' and then often are played again and again, or play can be combinatorially infinite. Users are asked to play unto obsession. *Credit* generally goes to the company, with occasional brand-name creator credit. In particular the creators of some cult games are increasingly known and are moving towards celebrity status. On large, mainstream games, credits in the Hollywood film manner are often available, but are essentially hidden. Who wrote Microsoft Word? Do you know even one name? *Success* is judged by sales, measurable use data, and to some extent, reviews. *Archiving* is somewhat haphazard given the culture of obsolescence of both the game programs and the machines that run them. Fan subcultures have preserved private collections, but it's unclear if and how these will make their way into permanent archives.

The creator/user relationship in the world of games is extremely user-focused. Users are royalty and games are constantly tested, tweaked and adjusted to please users and garner more time-on-device. Games are designed with careful pedagogical strategies to teach new users how to play in the most entertaining way. Games give lavish feedback to users to signal their missteps and celebrate their successes. Elaborate tutorials, hotlines and other external forms of user support are provided by game companies. Additional fan-created support material surrounds the most popular games. Responsibility for the experience is generally ascribed to the game company, since key creators are not commonly known by name.

Useful for netprov from the world of games are the notions of testing, player care and feedback, a refreshing and novel notion for those of us from a literary background. When was the last time an author wrote to you to ask how you liked her book and what she might do to make your experience of it better? When was the last time an author congratulated you for making it through chapter eight and gave you a gold star and a cute piece of music as a reward? We have made Player Care a role on our netprov teams. Precise user metrics offer the opportunity to examine use in detail (again, a bit daunting for literary folk). How many read through the work to the end? Where did they get bored and why?

### 3.5. The world of internet, personal and social media

*Composition* varies widely from professional teams growing out of advertising, mass media, graphic design and other traditions to informal, self-taught independent creators. Social media supports massive crowdsourced content production. Subcultures and subgenres proliferate in parallel. Newer platforms blur the lines between professional and amateur composition by blending commissioned content with crowdsourced content. *Gatekeeping* is theoretically almost non-existent, although capital can pay for the programming, design and promotion that help sites to become popular. Popularity, as measured by seemingly objective metrics, performs a gatekeeping function often unconsciously assumed to be democratic. Automated graphic design makes distinction between professional and amateur production difficult. *Production*, via increasingly user-friendly publishing platforms, consists of writing, image-making, image-sharing, filmmaking, film-sharing and live broadcasting. These can be done by trained professionals or untrained amateurs. *Invitation* consists of becoming visible and accessible via hypertextual links amidst the vast sea of creators vying for users' attention. Creators do most of this work themselves, unless they are working in the rare publishing-tradition model. *Offering* is ongoing, episodic units of text and image. Emphasis is on the most recent units, which are more easily accessible and are considered to be of more relevance and value. Offerings are fluid and can easily be modified. They often include feedback from users, edited or unedited. *Use* is overwhelmingly solo, and consists primarily of a single encounter

with the offering. A cultural assumption from the literary world – that users will read/view the entire piece in order – carries through into this world, although most users do not do this. Actual use consists largely of skimming. Users are asked to click on the work and to share it with others. *Credit* is widely variable, ranging from real names through pseudonymity to anonymity. Credit is only sometimes given for repurposed images and text originally created by others. *Success* is measured by usage metrics developed for advertisers: clicks, views, votes and other data. To succeed the work must be shared by users and 'go viral'. *Archiving* is either of no concern to creators and users, or they assume that the platform owners are taking care of it. The cultural emphasis on novelty makes historic material seem of little value. Scholarly archiving programs exist but are little known by most users.

The creator/user relationship in the world of internet, personal and social media is fundamentally marked by the common feature of interactivity – the ability to register an immediate reaction in the form of Likes, Favourites, comments etc., or to directly email the creator. This functions to level the power hierarchies found in other worlds, such as literature's meritocracy and mass media's celebritocracy. The power to publish an immediate response in this world is assumed as a right.

Useful for netprov from the world of internet, personal and social media are the many subcultures of participation and collaboration on which many netprovs are founded. No other world allows creators to satirise giant advertising corporations, such as Facebook, from within their own systems. And Mark C. Marino and I find endless creative inspiration in the many platforms and subcultures that are begging to be satirised.

## 4. Conclusion, or the game is not over

Imagine an art form with the depth of literature, the immediacy and thrill of theatre, the production skill and thorough crediting of mass media, the care for user experience and user involvement of games, all taking place in the emerging zone of digital communications. This is what I think netprov can become. How will it get there? By boldly and reflectively mixing and matching elements of all of its tributary fields.

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## CV



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Rob Wittig's background is a combination of graphic design, literature and digital culture. In the early 1980s he co-founded the legendary IN.S.OMNIA electronic bulletin board with the Surrealist-style literary and art group Invisible Seattle. IN.S.OMNIA was one of the earliest online art projects of the digital age. In 1989 he received a Fulbright grant to study the writing and graphic design of electronic literature with French philosopher Jacques Derrida in Paris. Rob's book based on that work, titled *Invisible Rendezvous* was published in 1995. Alongside his creative projects, Rob worked for 15 years in major publishing and graphic design firms in Chicago. In 2008, Rob's web project *Fall of the Site of Marsha* was among the first works of electronic literature to be archived in the Library of Congress. He is currently developing high-design, collaborative fiction projects in a form called netprov, networked improv literature. Rob holds an M.A. in Digital Culture from the University of Bergen, Norway (2011).

