

Social Media Narrative:
Issues in Contemporary Practice

hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy
and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:

Lineage and Contemporary Practice
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Transcript: Mark Marino



Mark Marino

• November 16

Thank you for having us! This is an extraordinary gathering, and I feel honored to be included. I'd like to speak to the issues of trolls. Some of netprov's most controversial projects have involved trolling -- though the trolls were not under our bridges but we were (mostly I am) the trolls (troll) under theirs. But I'll let you decide whether we are troublesome trolls (like the President), musical trolls (like Justin Timberlake), or fishing trolls (like those folks dragging multiple fishing lines in the hopes of many bites). This last kind seems closest to the troll mask we wear in order to instigate play in netprov.

Let me explain. As [Rob Wittig](#), has defined them, netprovs are improvisations played out over networked digital media, such as SNSs or online forums. Some of them have been framed as open fictions (Thermophiles in Love, IWWF, Air-B-N-Me, Mem-Eraze). Others are not. For example, when we played out @Tempspence, we did not tell @SpencerPratt's followers that we were about to write a story. Or in one of my earliest netprovs, later titled The Ballad of Workstudy Seth, I did not announce that the main character, my ersatz workstudy student, was fictional. I just started telling a story.

The most controversial of these projects was @occupymla, in which Rob and I played out a fictional Occupy movement protesting the Modern Language Association. That project went on for nearly 1.5 years, and we only revealed at the very end that it was a fiction. Needless to say, some were none too pleased. However, the issues we were raising (adjunct rights, in particular) put us and our jobs (as contingent faculty) in peril.

But we weren't truly trolling in any of these projects. We weren't trying to be "bad actors" in the sense of stereotypical troll behavior. Instead, we were performing our roles in the midst of networks where the rules of play are tenuous at best. More to the point, we were performing purposeful artistic and critical interventions on networks by breaking the rules -- which on media platforms that are only a nanosecond old can at best only be considered, like The Pirate Code, to be suggestions. I say "we," but the impulse to walk on the edge is usually mine. Rob jumps in and supports these projects in his own brilliant and generous way, but he generally prefers open netprovs, ones that

announce their fictional quality, so that we don't hurt anyone. And I'm grateful to him for that caution.

That said, he's the first point out that literary history (From Gulliver's Travels to the Bronx Zoo's Cobra) is full of authors saying they were someone they weren't -- not just in the stories but on the covers of these works! I hope that in some small way our trolling, if it be that, may incite and inspire, by pushing us out of the commercialized verified identities of Facebait back to a moment when we saw Internet identities as performance -- times like the late 20th -- or perhaps more like the 18th Century!

Comments



Judy Malloy Mark Marino teaches writing at the University of Southern California, where he directs the Humanities and Critical Code Studies Lab, including the Critical Code Studies Working Group. Visit

<http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#mark> for more information,



November 16 at 7:40am



Judy Malloy Welcome, Mark, it's great to see you here!

In addition to your work on netprovs, I'd like to point out the importance of the Critical Code Studies Working Group -- <http://hacslab.com/> -- which in itself is a notable discussion-based SNS.



The Humanities and Critical Code Studies Lab | @ the University of Southern...

The 4th biannual Critical Code Studies Working Group (CCSWG), Jan 18-Feb 14th is underway, and you are invited to join us for explorations of code in culture and culture through code.
hacslab.com

November 16 at 7:52am



Victoria Pagan-Perez I loved the way that you use trolling, it is very interesting to see.

November 16 at 3:03pm



Antoinette LaFarge I've been thinking about trolling a good deal as well, and I spoke about it earlier this year at the [#UNIT](#) Festival in Berlin. Like Mark, I have a broad history of role-playing in cyberspace, as with the Plaintext Players in the 1990s and early 2000s. And also of creating projects that are undisclosed fictions, which often look superficially like hoaxes or trolling once the fiction is declared or exposed. So this statement by Mark really resonated for me: "We weren't trying to be 'bad actors' in the sense of stereotypical troll behavior. Instead, we were performing our roles in the midst of networks where the rules of play are tenuous at best."

This is the crucial point: there are no rules of play on the internet. Really. 25 years on, there are no effective rules of play on the net that extend beyond the policies set by managers of specific software. What we have instead are the norms that we have ported over from outside the internet, the best of which are ever useful, like 'trash the idea not the person'. But norms are not rules; they are easy to break, especially in a social arena where people don't actually want certain norms to apply. A lot of the time on the internet, people want to be pseudonymous. It turns out that many of us want to perform more than we want to manage some stable version of ourselves. We even treat our apparently real selves performatively, creating slightly idealized façade selves in spaces like this one.

It is equally important to notice that there is too little effective policing of the net in the strict sense of making arrests for X behavior that broke Y law, with a few exceptions for high-visibility areas like child porn and large-scale commercial hacking. If our daily reality of stop-and-frisk and mass incarceration is overpoliced, it can be argued that the internet is presently underpoliced. Very real harm is being done by such tactics as doxing, identity theft, and threats of rape and murder—especially to women and minorities—and these actions are being gotten away with even though there are laws that could be brought to bear in all of those areas. And every time some troll gets away with crimes of these kinds, it enables and encourages dozens of other trolls.

I don't think we will make serious headway on trolling unless we collectively acknowledge that the internet is a performance space, it is a space that affords fiction. How do we then manage it productively in that direction? Because the alternative would be trying to push the entire net towards a real-names-only, biomarker-gated panoptical space; and while that could theoretically make enforcement easier (though I'm doubtful, because it doesn't solve the problem of the low prioritization of trolling-type crimes), it isn't going to happen anytime soon, and it is a remarkably unappealing idea. A great deal of the appeal of the net comes from the fact that we already live in a real-names-only, biomarker-gated panoptical space, and we all pretty much hate that aspect of it.

November 16 at 3:32pm



Mark Marino Terrific points, Antoinette. Do you find that people respond to your work (or the idea of creative productive trolling) by becoming indignant? Again, for those of us who first encountered an Internet pre-FB (a la Life on the Screen, Turkle), it remains a playspace with dubious claims to authentic behavior. But I can't say I don't worry that my creative use of the cracks in the system takes advantages of similar methods that others use for trolling and abuse in the negative space. People have suggested as much to me. Nonetheless, people wear costumes in plays and masks in robberies, and no one attacks actors for their stage paint (if that makes sense).

November 16 at 5:22pm



Antoinette LaFarge In line with Jay's point below, when what I do verges on 'hoax' people nearly always become indignant. I think the larger issue here, which you bring up by referencing theater, is the question of ludic space and how it is bounded. We are most comfortable with clear bounds (e.g. a proscenium separating audience and actors), but it is usually exciting when the bounds are blurred or breached (e.g. breaking the fourth wall). So here we are on the internet, which in one sense does have clear bounds, as set essentially by what is connected via the domain name system (or choose your own version of this definition). The strong version of my argument would be that it all affords itself as a ludic space and we only tenuously and temporarily carve out nonludic interludes (what I think of as the 'real name' areas). I believe this is the inverse of how nearly everyone sees the net: most people consider it just another slightly different 'normal' space with ludic interludes-- only there is quite a lot of dissension on which are the ludic interludes. And that springs from yet another factor: people don't always want to admit that what they are actually doing is playing rather than 'being' or 'working'.

November 18 at 1:06pm



Mark Marino I should note also that so far Rob and I have had good luck creating netprovs that seem not to resist (because like a borg collective they absorb) all behaviors (troll or otherwise).

November 16 at 5:24pm



Jay Bushman Hi Mark! Glad see the Netprov flag still flying. Trolling and the ethics of announcing your fiction are an always-interesting topic. In my commercial work, I am continually finding myself in situations where, when someone is coming to networked, social, or interactive storytelling for the first time, they will often immediately want to build some kind of hoax into the story, with the mistaken idea that when the reality is revealed it will be an exciting moment for the audience. I often have to point out that 1) no it won't be 2) it will actually make people quite angry and 3) feeling lied to, most audience for the project will immediately flee. These warnings are almost never heeded, unfortunately.

November 16 at 8:10pm



Mark Marino Yes, Jay, I'd say the one time people really didn't pretend to be injured (for long) was actually the two times we did work as Spencer Pratt. That's almost the reverse situation -- where people think of him as being a troll already, so when we used his account for fictional purposes and then revealed our involvement, it was meant with a mighty shrug or mild surprise that he would lend his account to artistic purposes.. Occupy MLA was a different story, though as I mentioned, we weren't trying to hoax anyone so much as perform a protest (of a much larger problem -- the adjunctification of universities) under the thin veil of fiction. To that, some of the admins of MLA performed some public indignation, but it seems a bit disingenuous in retrospect.

November 17 at 4:06am



Antoinette LaFarge Agreed, Jay, that artists are often naive about the consequences of unleashing hoax-type mischief. I don't think one should work that way unless one is prepared engage in long discussions after the fact. But it's also true that the spirit of the hoax matters. I have been on the receiving end of lots of such mischief in my life, and most of the time I am fine with it because it affords me an opportunity to see my own blindness (as it were). Being tricked (as in a magic show) and being deliberately and maliciously made to look stupid are not necessarily the same thing, and audiences in my experience are often sensitive to the difference. And there are strategies to defuse the situation ahead of time, like leaving bread crumbs that foster doubt or skepticism—which is effective because then people feel much less blindsided in the end. And in general I find uncertainty to be a more productive mental state than belief in all kinds of ways.

November 18 at 1:19pm



Aly Steered Straight I read that you work with your family to create electronic literature for children. I know that working with family can be both rewarding and aggravating and I was wondering what kind of hurdles you faced in working with yours?

November 20 at 2:30pm



Mark Marino Thanks for your question, Aly. Working with my children on these stories has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life as an artist (and otherwise). Seeing how they think, getting to share in the creative process, and getting to strategize about storytelling with them is phenomenal. There's also the fact that these stories are a way for our family to meditate on adoption (my son is adopted) -- makes it even richer. Whether they're posing for pictures (that become the illustrations) or helping to shape the plots, their play is profound.

November 20 at 2:34pm



Mark Marino Aly, but to address the hurdles part, as a dad, I've got to work not to make writing a chore or something I'm forcing them to do. I don't want to be that kind of dad (like the writing version of a sports or beauty pageant parent). So I try a more indirect approach -- like taking a moment when we're driving to say, hey, what do you think of

this idea. Or to discuss on movies we've just seen as a way to think about story telling plans indirectly -- rather than saying -- "okay, now we have to sit down and write." I like to keep it playful and fun -- yet we do take it deep because they know storytelling -- their instincts are soo good. The stories are always richer for their input.

November 20 at 2:41pm



Mark Marino My son -- when I just asked him whether it is hard to work together on stories said: "Nope, and I love my Dad."

November 20 at 2:39pm



Mark Marino Like I said, that sort of thing makes it all worthwhile.

November 20 at 2:40pm



Aly Steered Straight Thanks for answering my question and joining in the discussions. I think it's awesome that your kids help with the process! There is nothing greater than a child's imagination to me and I love that your kids enjoy working with you!

November 25 at 9:44am

November 21 at 6:36pm



Judy Malloy There is always much to say about the many facets of your work [Mark Marino](#) Indeed, just a few days ago, when we were looking at electronic literature as a form of public literature Bree Gibbs singled out your "a show of hands", not only for its hypertextual authoring, but also for your moving story of the lives of a Mexican American family,

I have also found that your collaboratively-created LA Flood -- with its innovative use of Google maps to bring in many different voices in a narrative based on a fictional simulated disaster -- demonstrates very well in social media narrative classes.

And as you mention in your statement, in 2013, TV reality star Spencer Pratt (The Hills) lent his Twitter account to you, his USC Prof and to your collaborator, [Rob Wittig](#) . The resulting work, @tempspence -- <http://markcmarino.com/tempspence/> -- was an audience participatory netprov in which Twitter was used both as a component of the framing device and as an authoring system.

Since we've talked about safe platforms here I'd also like to point again to The Humanities and Critical Code Studies Lab's Critical Code Studies Working Group online conference --- that primarily under your direction, hosts intense discussions on exploring code with humanities methodologies -- as a perfect example of how serious conversations thrive on gated platforms.

Cheers! And thanks so much for joining us here!

November 28 at 11:14am

