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Kate Durbin

Kate Durbin interviews Rob Wittig & Mark C. Marino of "Tempspence"

In January 2013, reality television star Spencer Pratt offered use of his official Twitter account to electronic literature writers Mark Marino and Rob Wittig while he was filming Celebrity Big Brother in London. The result was a netprov (networked improv narrative) project in which a fictional British poet supposedly hijacked Spencer's phone and identity, was then unmasked, and began to promote his own poetry. The fictional British poet wound up encouraging Spencer's followers to write their own poems. Originally titled "Reality," the project was dubbed Temporary Spencer or "Tempspence" by fans.

As someone who follows and re-tweets celebrities on Twitter for my own conceptual Twitter project, I came across Tempspence naturally, as I followed and re-tweeted Spencer Pratt already. When Spencer / Temspence tweeted that he was buying his girlfriend Heidi Montag my collaborator Amaranth Borsuk's digital poetry book Between Page and Screen, the top of my head

exploded, in a post-Dickinson-cyberspace kind of way. My own transcription project of an episode of The Hills made Tempspence particularly fascinating to me, since I'd been studying the multi-faceted character of Spencer Pratt for a long time. And of course I cannot resist any project that implodes the false distance between mediums / worlds normally considered totally disparate, such as reality TV and avant garde literature. So, after eagerly following the Tempspence project to its completion, I knew I had to find out more about the masterminds behind it.

Kate: Tell me how Tempspence came about. It seems a miracle of literary and reality TV worlds colliding!

Mark: Spencer was a student in my Advanced Writing course at USC. During that class, Rob and I ran a netprov called F.A.I.L. (Fantasy Automated Investors' League) with the students. That game introduced Spencer to #netprov, but I believe he has a natural affinity for improvised performance after years on Reality TV. He'd also seen my Workstudy Seth tweets and commiserated about having someone go rogue on your Twitter account. So as January approached and he knew he'd be sequestered from Twitter for three weeks (or less), he asked if I'd be interested in running a netprov through his account. He initially proposed me Tweeting as him on a phone hidden in the Big Brother house, but since the logistics of that were too difficult, given the distance, the constant surveillance, and the time difference, I proposed the "lost phone" idea. Playing a fictional character in England who had found his phone would be much easier, and so on Jan 1, Heidi Tweeted that Spencer had lost the new phone she'd bought Spencer for Christmas during their wild New Year's Eve celebrations.

Kate: I love this on so many levels. I love that Spencer, the reality TV celebrity, was your student, Mark, and I also love that he was the one who approached you to run a netprov through his account. I love that he "got" the game, and was willing to play, although I think you are right that his work in reality TV would naturally attune him toward improv performance, as well as performance mediated through the latest technological mediums, trying out new ways of reaching an audience. Spencer on The Hills was such a fascinating character–you could almost see his mind working as he improvised scenes, manipulating situations to evoke audience response. It sounds like he saw a similar opportunity in working with you two.

Did Spencer talk to you at all about what he specifically hoped to gain through the experience, or why he wanted to do this? And why did you guys want to do it? Was there a particular experience you wanted to have, or to create?

Mark: Well, Spencer's account is almost at 1 million followers. Almost. And getting to know him and his oeuvre, I have come to recognize him as king of the publicity stunt. That's why it was almost impossible to shake people's belief that Spencer was the one behind the account the whole time. Also, the literary element, the poet and his games, allowed Spencer to do something more sophisticated with his image than say, blowing his fortune on the 2012 apocalypse. For Rob and I, it was a chance to bring netprov to a huge audience that had not previously been exposed to it — except in the very general sense that Spencerpratt account is basically always netprov. But playing with Spencer's image was the ultimate lure. Like I was saying, as a reality tv star, Spencer lives a kind netprov, and yet people always think they're getting the "real" him. They were aghast (or pretended to be) at the thought that someone other than Spencer would Tweet from his account either as a stunt or having stolen or found his phone. I would get tides of hate from all sides.

Rob: Right from the first phone call from Mark in which he explained to me that Spencer had offered this amazing opportunity, Mark and I were totally cracked up and totally delighted by the multi-leveled, hall-of-mirrors dimension of the situation. First, it seems to me that Spencer is hyper-aware of himself as performance, and of a split between some kind of Public Spencer and some kind Private Spencer, or, actually, a whole family of various flavors of Public Spencers and Private Spencers. So then, Mark said, we were going to occupy this already full Spencer-verse with another, completely alien character who would have found/swiped Spencer's phone — some nutty little British Poet wannabe — and who would himself be tortured or tantalized by his own

identity split: the urge to make his poetry famous through Spencer's enormous follower list, but the fear that if his identity became known he'd get into trouble for having Spencer's phone — so he couldn't use his real name. He would have to be both famous and not-famous. There's something about the frustrated desire of the poet that mirrors Spencer's own desire to occupy and play with the public's attention. I still love Mark's original code name for the project —"Reality" — and I thought that was so smart. Because the truth of it is that it's not just Spencer and our poet who perform their identity self-consciously in Twitter . . . pretty much everyone is doing it, all the time. Who is the real Twitter you? The grumpy one from this morning, or the drunk one from last night? The bitter-breakup you or the new-love-affair you? The job hunter or the job hater? Language is performed and written language in social media is very much performed — because of timing, how you reply and retweet others, how you spell and misspell. And our recent netprov (networked improv narrative) projects had played with all that. And Spencer himself enjoyed playing netprov and figured out it would be a great form to use to explore these issues of "reality." Lucky us!

Kate: You've described the "Twitter" identity crisis so perfectly, Rob. I've experienced similar weirdness on Twitter, since on it I "am" the celebrities I retweet, and also the Kate Durbin commenting on whatever-of-the-moment. On Twitter we are large—we contain multitudes!
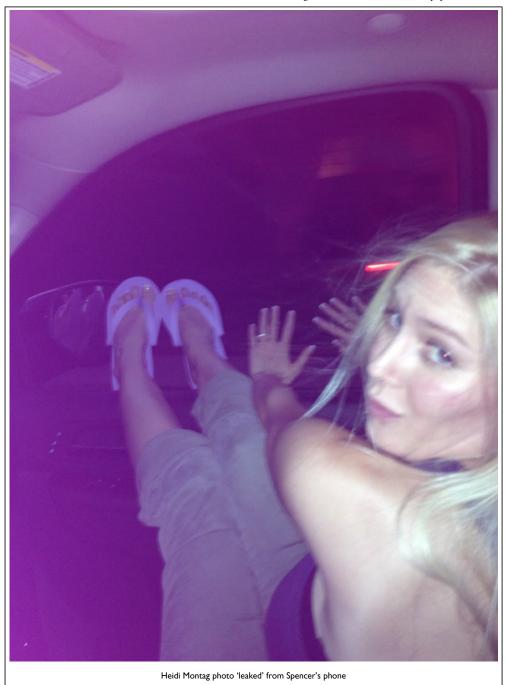
And speaking of "reality," I can see how mind-blowing this entire experience would be, not only for Spencer's fans, but also for literary types, who see reality TV as a debased and sort of stupid medium, non-literary. One of the things I've always loved about reality TV is how it reveals the many fictions that make up our "realities," just as good fiction reveals the reality in fiction. It seems like your experiment reveals the closeness of the two mediums in ingenious ways. Have you seen the final scene of MTV's The Hills, where a gaffey comes and rolls away the Hollywood sign and the heartfelt goodbye between Kristin Cavallari and Brody Jenner is revealed to be taking place on an indoor set? Your game with Spencer reminds me of that moment, first with weeks of the con, and the big reveal that the players (and directors) know more than the audience gives them credit for, that this has been a co-constructed fiction all along between audience and "actors." It was that scene that inspired me to write my own transcription of an entire episode of The Hills, and convinced me that reality TV is one of the most complex and fascinating art mediums of our cultural moment.

This leads me to my next series of questions: what are your thoughts on reality TV? Do you find the medium interesting? Is it more interesting to you now that you know more about Spencer

Pratt and how he works? What were your thoughts about it before the Tempspence project?

Mark: Prior to this project, I was basically like everyone else. I didn't think much about reality TV. Just saw it as a kind of guilty pleasure. I knew people who worked as story editors in reality TV, so I wasn't shocked to hear how scripted it was. Still, getting to know Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag and getting to play Spencer Pratt transformed my appreciation for the form and its impact on viewers. You know, when Spencer got out of the CBB house, he told me a story about walking in on his housemates as they were playing Jenga. Spencer asked if any of them played chess, but no one did. And reflecting on those episodes, I saw how he was playing a reality TV chess throughout the show, they were basically trying not to knock over their own stacks of blocks.

Watching them perform on Celebrity Big Brother UK while reading headlines I helped write also opened my eyes to how Reality TV does not end at the TV screen but extends and is an extension of the tabloid world. Reality TV in this light seems to merely extend the pop news factory that's probably as old as mass media. It was telling that when we were done, certain tabloids and celeb sites (Ok! and RadarOnline) ran the story of the hoax as an interesting twist on Spencer's antics, while others said that wasn't their cup of tea, since they were more interested essentially in the construction of the outrageous character of Spencer — or at least circulating wild headlines as Spencer released them.

Heidi Montag photo 'leaked' from Spencer's phone

Rob: I've been interested in reality TV for a long time. I used to confound my literary friends by saying that I thought (producer) Mark Burnett was a genius after I first started watching Survivor in its second season. He knew so well how to get kinds of image that Americans would lust after, principally very genuine-looking crying and very genuine-looking anger. America's number one favorite thing on TV is to see people really cry. That's true across all genres of TV: news, drama, daytime soaps, reality shows, talent shows, documentaries, talk shows, commercials, religious shows; it's the mainstream money shot. The second favorite thing is people losing their tempers. It's what wins Oscars, too, by and large: crying and yelling. People are enormously sophisticated in reading facial expressions and body language — a huge amount of real estate in the brain is devoted to decoding super-subtle variations in these signals — and I think the vast majority of people instantly know the difference between fake crying and real crying, even if they can't articulate it. Seeing real crying and real yelling (or the closest possible facsimile) reaches into the brain and causes strong emotions in the viewer; I think people become junkies for "the real thing," their habit gets bigger and bigger, they get very picky, very hard to satisfy. I was into Survivor and Real World and Apprentice for couple of years then my attention went to other new forms.

What fascinated me as a creative person was the astonishing use of digital cameras, cinematography, sound design, and above all, editing — the whole language of film — to create something so supremely artificial, so fabulously highly-crafted, that would could still be interpreted in popular culture as transparent, artless "reality!" I'd be watching these emotional Apprentice or Bachelor scenes with my friends and my friends would be getting incredibly weepy and I'd be going: "remember that there's a camera person and sound person standing right there! These people are surrounded by production people. That's where the real romances probably are — between the cast and a sound person." And it's interesting to note that as The Office drew to a close there was the spectre of a romance between a member of the fictional "documentary" crew and the character Pam. In fact my idea for a reality show is to do a show about the remote-location crew of a show like Survivor. Those crews must have their own temporary camp or hotel rooms or something near where the cast lives. Imagine what goes on in the crew camp at night! Imagine the squabbles! Imagine the romances! I get it that the profusion of reality shows is partly due to the writer's strike — a low budget way to get evening soap-opera-style crying images and yelling images and fill an hour. But at the same time I think there are all kinds of interesting cultural and social things to think about. There's something interesting in the similarity between this forbidden or transgressive or impossible contact between the crew and the cast and the contact between Spencer and his fans in Twitter that we were playing with. Perhaps it's something like stepping through the fourth wall . . . the audience member stepping on stage and becoming part of the show. Then there's the whole notion that everyday life is meaningless until it appears on TV. Then it's real. Then it means something. Fame equals reality. Non-fame is some kind of shadow existence, purgatory, between heaven and hell. Our Tempspence netprov poet certainly believed something like that. Our poet craved fame.

Kate: A poet who craves fame seems a real taboo in the literary world, at least one that openly craves it. Can you tell me more about what made you choose an English poet for the netprov character? I thought it was interesting that you made him English, creating a connection to the long, heavy history of English literature, including, of course, Shakespeare. I have always maintained that Shakespeare would have written for reality TV if he were alive today. And yet poets are often very hesitant to associate themselves with fame culture, or popular culture, and especially reality TV. Many consider themselves above it.

Mark: Well, Celebrity Big Brother UK helped us pick our base country. Rob and I tend toward paradoxes, so we wanted a character that would be perceived as the antithesis of Spencer's persona, someone who perhaps had never even heard of him. Someone who would seem like he was from a different planet entirely. And yet we wanted an artist, someone with a stake in the fame game, someone whose very artform had doomed him to obscurity. Elitist lit types can look down their noses on reality celebs while they struggle to get anyone to look at their own work. We loved the idea of this artist who had the chance of the lifetime to get his words out there (in 140 character bursts), but who could end up in all sorts of trouble if people figured out who he was. Of course, Rob and I are also lit freaks, so the Brit Lit appeal was high — especially the Edmund Spenser connections. But most importantly, we wanted to be able to play language

games, and a poet was just the ticket.

Rob: One thing you get from digging deep into the study of literature is how many of the works that seem classic and heavy in our day were radical and experimental and had low social status in their own time. I think you're right, Kate, that Shakespeare would have written reality TV. Shakespeare would be astonished that we consider his plays "literature." To him, literature was his poems . . . and not even his love sonnets, those were more like social media messages in a way, actually intended primarily for a specific person (even though he wanted them to be really, really good social media messages) . . . but his long poems based on classical Greek and Roman themes, the poems that are now the most obscure and the hardest to read. In Shakespeare's day "literature" meant writing in the style of the Greeks and Romans, and plays were merely pop culture. Plays were a kind of a folk art that had become a fad among the university students and Shakespeare's immediate predecessors had goofed around with mixing high culture elements into this pop culture play format. The thing that Shakespeare was doing is what often happens when new forms of writing come into existence, he was saying "These pop plays can be really fun and exciting and scary and sad . . . but how good could they be, if you really tried to write them super-well? Could they be as good as the classic literature of the Greeks and Romans? Let's try!" And of course he scored! Not to compare us to Shakespeare, but it is, in fact, the same question that Mark and I are asking all the time about netprov. People are doing tons of writing — and tons of creative writing, really, when you think about memes and Twitter gags and similar forms — doing netprov-like things all the time now. We're in a golden age of writing. So: how good can netprov get? If you brought to it all the amazing bag of tricks that the good writers have used over the years, what would happen? And, in my definition, "good" writing does not mean taking recognizably-literary-sounding language from the past and jamming it uncomfortably into these new forms. Good writing means using the everyday language that people already use in the new forms and intensifying it, cranking up the puns and echoes and sounds and trying to be as smart as you can with it. The goal is not to sound "writerly" but to study the people who really crack you up or move you in a medium like Twitter, for example, and use all their best techniques plus some strategies from literary history to make super-good Tweets if you can.

The other aspect that we really wanted to play with was to see if we could get other people playing with us, writing with us. That's one thing that's really new to electronic literature in general, the possibility that readers can instantly become writers. I think that's really one of the great potentials of netprov as a form. The goal is not just to write really good stuff but to try to model examples, and inspire and empower people we don't know to write really good stuff, too. Everybody up on stage! Dance with Spencer! Dance with us! C'mon!

Kate: I love that. Your experiment is really a social one, a collective one, which is precisely what reality TV is and what literature could use more of (although some might argue that the comment boards on online journals make literature much more social than it once was.)

Let's talk about the Twitter audience a little bit more. Can you tell me more about the writing games you played with them?

Mark: Yes, a big part of "Being @spencerpratt" were the various writing games. For the most part, Rob would come up with them and I would launch them. We tried to model them for the players in a Tweet or two, and then I'd favorite the best of the them or follow people as a reward, or both. Some were more poetry centered, like centode (writing a collaborative cento and ode) and twouplets (rhyming other people's Tweets). Others played off the central trope. One of my favorites was #imspencerpratt For that game, tempspence was saying that Spencer was nothing more than a vehicle for other people's words, so he asked the followers to write Tweets they wanted @spencerpratt to say. Of course, there was the inevitable request to have him say, "I love…." fill in the blank of the followers. But the Tweet that was the most deliciously absurd asked him to type "I LOVE UNICORNS," which he did to much delight. Rob has more insight into the other games…

Kate: I love unicorns.

Rob: So the basic fun of Tempspence was being this kind of droopy, shy-but-ambitious British poet in Spencer's account. But, as Mark and I have been thinking of writing in new media, a big payoff is the opportunity to be collaborative — not just one-direction "I'm an Author and you're the audience," but back-and-forth "let's create something together!" So, since Mark had already figured out our character was a poet, I thought "let's have our poet get everybody writing poetry with us!" Rhymed and metered poetry is already a kind of game, anyway. The word "poetry" still can carry with it a sense of "stuffy, boring, old-fashioned," so simply calling what we were doing "games" seemed like a way to try to get people into real poetry — which is awesome, not stuffy.

Some of the games, like #twouplets and #prattplus7 (an adaptation of the classic Oulipo game N+7; in it, you take a line of poetry and replace each noun with the seventh noun that follows it in the dictionary), were ways of playing with the materiality of language, which is always fun. Rhymes are so bizarre and random — two words sound and look very similar, but their meanings and utterly separate. It forces you to connect two parts of your brain — the sound part and the meaning part — in a very odd way. But odd and pleasurable, if you do it well. Twitter is an incredibly fun place to play with the materiality of language.

A lot of the games worked well, but I especially loved the ones that combined asking people for real details about themselves and their bfs and gfs with the big ideas of Tempspence: issues of identity, celebrity, wearing various kinds of masks.

The #prattfall game followed a gigantic hangover on the part of our fictional poet. The instructions for #prattfall were: "For this game, poets describe something the first thing they saw (something concrete, particular) when they opened there eyes on the worst morning after."

The instructions for #shibboleth were: "To play this game, you tweet something about yourself, about the real you, the you-you, that only you and those closest to you, your mum, your best mate, would also know." (A shibboleth is a kind of password of biblical times.)

The instructions for #ekphrastic were: In this game, we try to describe pictures of ourselves, revealing intimate details and moments from our lives, without attaching the photo to our tweet. Since TempSpence cannot share a picture of himself, we take on his burden by trying to share ourselves without showing ourselves. It's a way to become intimate while remaining anonymous." (Ekphrasis means describing a picture.)

The meta-game for Mark and me is to see how good this goofing-around poetry can get. And people came up with some really good examples. As we say, we want to "play and go deep."

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Kate Durbin is a Los Angeles-based writer and artist. She is author of The Ravenous Audience (Akashic Books, 2009), and co-author, with Amaranth Borsuk, of Abra, forthcoming as an iPad app and artist book with the help of a grant from Center for Book and Paper Arts at Columbia College Chicago, and as a trade paperback from 1913 Press. She is founding editor of Gaga Stigmata, and her tumblr project, Women as Objects, archives the teen girl tumblr aesthetic.

Mark C. Marino holds an MFA from Notre Dame and a Ph.D. from UC Riverside, where he focused on chatbots, electronic literature, games, and other new media. His works include "Marginalia in the Library of Babel" and "Stravinsky's Muse" He is the founder and editor of Bunk Magazine. He currently teaches writing at the University of Southern California. His latest work "a show of hands" is an adaptive hypertext novella. He is the Director of Communication of the Electronic Literature Organization. His recent scholarship has launched and developed the explication of computer source code in the area he calls Critical Code Studies. He has also been developing online tools for teaching writing including The Topoi Pageflakes and 22 Short Films about Grammar.

Rob Wittig's background is a combination of Literature, Graphic Design 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 literary projects of the digital age. In 1989 he received a Fulbright grant to study the writing and graphic design of electronic literature with 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 many 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 narrative. Rob teaches in the Departments of Art and Design and Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

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Spencer Pratt · 2 years ago

Kate,

Just wanted to drop in to say you're brilliant -- you're one of the few people who will admit (in public) that reality tv is an art form -- so poorly understood because it seems so toxic on the surface. And you're absolutely right, I've found it a natural transition to move into this new performance platform (social media).

And yea, verily, it is well worth retweeting that Rob & Mark are modern Shakespeares!

Looking forward to following more from you. I'm a fan!

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