

REALITY BYTES

How The Hills' Spencer Pratt Landed at the Center of a Complex Piece of Twitter Performance Art

"Yes, cheers, everyone, this is actually Spencer Pratt!"

By [Jessica Roy](#) • 01/28/13 9:32am



(Photo: Twitter)

For the past three weeks, the Twitter account of *The Hills*' Spencer Pratt has sounded nothing like the notorious MTV villain we all love to hate. Typically comprised of random bro-ish missives and retweets from celebrity magazines with links to articles about the antics of he and his wife, Heidi Montag, the tone of his Twitter began to change as soon as 2013 hit. What exactly happened to the infamous Mr. Pratt?

On January 1st, Ms. Montag tweeted that, following a New Year's Eve blowout, Mr. Pratt had lost his phone in London just before the duo were set to tape a season of *Celebrity Big Brother*. The next day, January 2nd, Mr. Pratt began tweeting again, but he sounded nothing like himself. "Testing...testing..." he wrote. "Yes, cheers, everyone, this is actually Spencer Pratt!"

Mr. Pratt, not exactly known for his predilection for highbrow literature, appeared to have taken a crash course in English lit. He tweeted asking for bookstore recommendations in London. He began to betray an impressive knowledge of poetry, engaging his followers in clever word games. Even stranger, he did not stop tweeting

once he entered the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, where participants' phones are typically confiscated until the end of taping. He claimed that the producers had allowed him to continue tweeting as a part of the show's plotline, but the producers denied it. Just what exactly was Mr. Pratt up to?

Mr. Pratt's devoted followers began to become suspicious, particularly after the *Big Brother* producers shot down his latest alibi. Soon the storyline took an unexpected turn: in a series of tweets, it was revealed that the person behind @SpencerPratt was actually a struggling British poet who was simply trying to gain exposure for his literary work. He was in love with two different women, and in a nod to the absurdity of reality television, used his followers to help decide which one to romantically pursue. Now aware that the account was no longer manned by the real Mr. Pratt, @SpencerPratt's followers dubbed the poet Tempspence.

But there was another layer to the story: As it turns out, Tempspence never actually existed. It was all an act, a new type of online performance art. Mr. Pratt's account had been hijacked (with his permission) by two writers named Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig, who have been developing a kind of "catfish lit." Called netprov (network improv narrative), the emerging genre is meant to marry the fast-tempoed nature of internet technology with the traditional ideas of improv. Mr. Wittig describes it as an "emerging art form that creates written stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time."

In fact, the duo had used Mr. Pratt's account to explore the nature of celebrity and reality. "Through the fictional tale of this obscure poet broadcasting from a Reality star's account, we explored themes of fame, language play, and what it means to be real," wrote the duo in a blog post explaining their work.

On January 26, the real @SpencerPratt returned and explained the nature of the mini hoax to his followers. "Since Jan 1. my account has been run by @markcmarino & @Neprov_Robwit in a #netprov they call: "Reality" <http://bit.ly/tempspence> #elit," he tweeted. "The obscure poet @tempspence & his romances with Una & Duessa were all part of a work of twitter improv fiction (netprov). Mark & Rob were especially

attracted to playing with a story about being real in my account. They were like: What if we gave the most unspencer person the chance to be famous thru my acct except he couldn't ever say his name?"

Though Mr. Pratt is not known for his devotion to art or literature, it turns out that he first discovered the concept of netprovs when taking Mr. Marino's writing class at USC. Mr. Marino told Betabeat that it was Mr. Pratt's idea to use his Twitter account as the stage for the netprov.

"Spencer was introduced to netprovs when he took my writing class at USC," Mr. Marino said. "He read my story [The Ballad of Workstudy Seth](#) (my first netprov) and played a netprov called The Fantasy Automated Investors League (<http://robwit.net/fail/>). I actually think the form meshed very well with his experience on Reality TV, which is basically improvising 'real life.' He seemed to also enjoy the opportunity to be more creative since he wasn't tied to his caricatured persona in the netprov."

"The real Spencer has a genuine love of poetry and owns a signed first-edition of Robert Frost's work," added Mr. Marino.

You can read the full list of tweets sent during the netprov [here](#) (PDF).

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