

ANATOMY OF A GAME

By Ryan Gilman

We all know the traditional speech from the first day of film school. The Dean tells the incoming students, "Look to your left and to your right. These are the people that you will be spending the rest of your career working with." It's the oldest speech in the book for a reason: ask any SCA alumnus with a long record of success and they'll tell you it's true.

This year, the School has taken that tradition one step farther with the interactive media-making game officially called *Reality Ends Here*, but known to the students simply as "The Game."

On a technical level, *Reality Ends Here* is a fifteen-week collaborative production, alternate reality game. In layman's terms, it's a new way for students to meet, network and start working together creatively. The game came out of a committee created by Dean Elizabeth M. Daley to envision the future of SCA.

"One key initiative for that committee was to establish a 'gateway experience' for incoming students that introduced them to the changing media landscape, the history and future of the School, the possibilities that can emerge from the SCA network of current and past students and the importance of bridging the divisions of the School while they are here, both socially and academically," said Interactive Media Division Chair Tracy Fullerton, who was one of the committee's original members, along with professors Holly Willis, Steve Anderson, Tara McPherson, Mary Sweeney, Michael Patterson and Michael Peyser.

The gateway class, which is being taught by Tara McPherson, was designed by the committee to introduce a new kind of social networking for SCA students, both on and offline, that would become critical to their involvement in courses and with each other.

"As the class developed, it became clear that a game layer would be a perfect way to achieve all of the goals set out by the committee without falling victim to the general survey or lecture class tradition we wanted to move beyond," Fullerton continued.

The game experience was designed by iMAP Ph.D candidate Jeff Watson, IMD MFA student Simon Wiscombe and Fullerton, who together focused on creating a unique entry point to this

experience, what alternate reality game designers call "the rabbit hole."

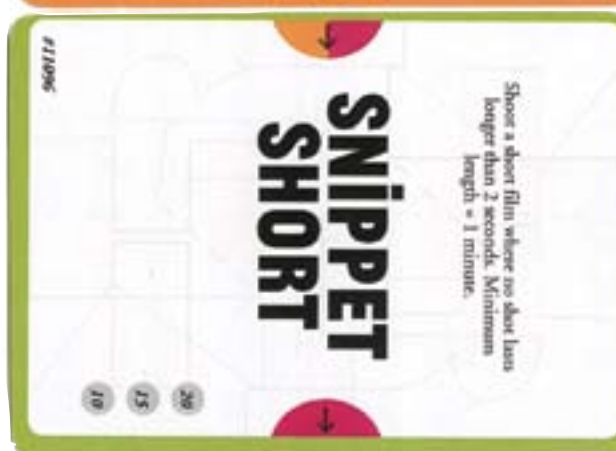
"Students got a postcard at orientation that had an old picture from SCA's original building on it and the cryptic message 'Carry your cards at all times,'" said game designer and creative director Jeff Watson. "A URL on the card led to a website that had a countdown timer on it."

During orientation, a flag was flown off the balcony of the SCA Complex with *Reality Ends Here's* logo on it. A super 8 camera with a coded message instructing the students to report to an unmarked office on the second floor was under the flag. The students deciphered the code and found the game office.

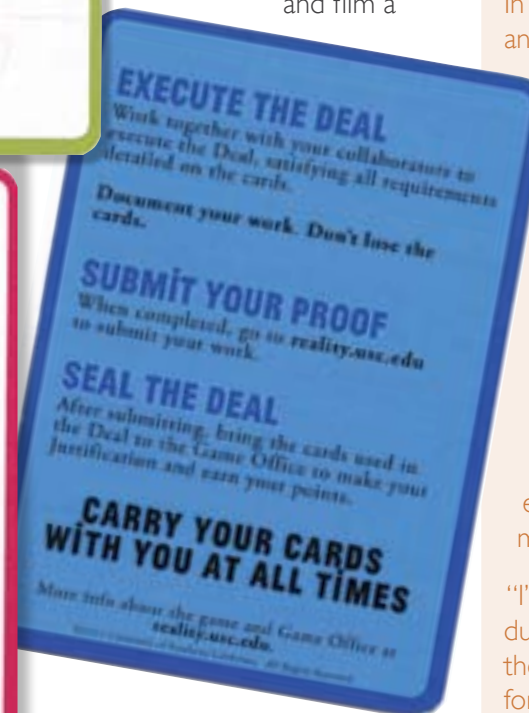
Once the students had found the game office, they could pick up their Reality "packs" – a deck of 10 playing cards, different cards for each player; that contained prompts and challenges that can be combined to create any number of creative deals.

For example, one student might have a card challenging them to make a "30-second short." Another student could have a connecting card that with the property "in an elevator," and a third student has another connecting card that stipulates that they must "use the colors black and white." The cards are each worth points, with bigger deals generating higher scores. All students who participate in the deals get the total number of points in the deal. Collaboration was the key to success.

Once a deal is struck, the students all work together to answer the challenge described by the prompt they've created. Some deals include cards that prompt them to meet and involve other freshman, or to link multiple projects together from various divisions – such as a shared story universe between a game, a video and a poster.



Once students have created a piece of media for a deal, they upload it to the game website at reality.usc.edu. They also have to come into the game office to show the cards that they used to make the deal and film a



"justification" video. In the justification video, the students have to describe their deal and how each of the cards applies to the project.

Each week, the students with the most points are rewarded with a very special prize: an encounter with an SCA alumnus or other well-known media maker.

Some of the encounters that students have had so far include meetings with director John Singleton, screenwriter John Watson, cinematographer Dante Spinotti, game designers Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen, writer/director John Waters and a visit to the set of *Mad Men* with writer Erin Levy.

The students have said that the game and the reward encounters have opened their eyes to both the future and the history of media making.



The Class

In addition to the game element of the experience, all freshman and first year transfer students enrolled in a class called Reality Starts Here, taught by Professor Tara McPherson. The irony of teaching a class about the future of media to a lecture hall wasn't lost on McPherson.

"Teaching what we imagine as a cutting-edge new class in a lecture format was a challenge," said McPherson. "It was very important to me that the class not devolve into fifteen weeks of me talking to them in a very old-school format."

In McPherson's class, things run the opposite of most lecture classes. To begin, students are asked to take out their laptops as opposed to putting them away. Instead of asking questions, students tweet to a class hashtag. Instead of the teacher explaining to them how media is created, the students create media.

"I've divided the students into eight groups and, at least once during the semester, one of those groups takes over one half of the class," continued McPherson. "The students doing the work for that week have a much richer and deeper experience of the material at hand while the students in the audience are equally or more engaged than they would be with a traditional lecture."

The class also featured guest speakers: Henry Jenkins (USC faculty); Jeremy Gibson (USC faculty: IMD); Barnet Kellman and David Isaacs (USC faculty: Production + Writing, Comedy@SCA Initiative); Marti Noxon (Writer/Producer: *Buffy*, *Mad Men*, *Glee*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, *Fright Night*); Tracy Fullerton (USC faculty: IMD); Richard Lemarchand (Game Designer at Naughty Dog); Elan Lee (Leading Designer of Alternate Reality Games for Nine Inch Nails and many others); Jon Dudowski (USC alum and editor on TV show *Fringe*); Norm Hollyn (USC faculty: Editing/Production); and Midge Costin (USC faculty: Sound/Production).

In the second week of the class, guest speaker Henry Jenkins told the class, "I do enjoy media. But, to me, enjoying media means being thoughtful about the media."

Jenkins neatly summed up the Reality Ends Here experience. In addition to being a place where students can meet each other, the experience had taught them to appreciate media and be thoughtful in their approach.



Anatomy of a Card

The cards in *Reality Ends Here* are double sided. One side contains a profile of either a media maker or a piece of media. People, places and things students should know about are presented to students with the hope of inspiring ideas and conversations. On the card above, a brief description of *On the Waterfront* with a screenshot is featured.

The other side contains an instruction, obstacle or caveat that has to be a part of the media project which students turn in for the project. In this case, they have to include and justify "At LA Harbor" which means the students either have to literally film at LA Harbor or find a creative way to represent LA Harbor in their projects.

The New Bullpen

"One of the things we're trying to pass on to the students with this project is the feeling of the bullpen which was an area of the film school back when the School was in the stables. It was this wild and unruly place with graffiti all over the walls and piles of film and people sitting on benches. I don't think it's surprising that the generation that came from the bullpen was one of the most fruitful in the School's history. It was a crazy place. That kind of cross-pollination space is something that having our amazing facilities actually limits. We've noticed that some of the pictures that the students are uploading to the new electronic bullpen in the game have the same swagger as some of the old photos of the bullpen generation. We named the interactive space The Bullpen out of respect for the School's past."

—Jeff Watson

How a Deal Goes Down

When it comes down to nuts and bolts, the basic unit of *Reality Ends Here* is the deal. In the third week of the game, a group of ten students made the biggest deal in the game up until that point by producing the trailer, "The Game," a loving homage to the game itself.

The mega-deal was born as a reaction to a group of students who started gaming the system. One "super team" organically emerged with the intention of winning every week.

"Right off the bat, a big group of people got together and they named themselves Marra," said freshman Sam Sandweiss. "They started putting out a lot of projects and they were very strategic."

Marra's strategy worked. The first two weeks, the top points earners were both members of Marra. In the third week, however, the idea of a "super deal" emerged.

"We decided, 'What if we make a deal about a group of kids that want to make a deal,'" said production freshman Michael Effenberger. "It's going to be haphazard and wonderful."

"We sat down and thought, 'let's make a really big deal,'" continued Sandweiss. "We wanted to make fun of the fact that some people were so concerned with winning that they had compromised their artistic vision."

The biggest deal in the history of the game was born, not out of great ambition but out of mocking the seriousness of the game.

"We decided that we wanted to make a project that spoofed how serious certain people had gotten about the game," said IMD freshman Riley Pietsch.

The vision for "The Game" came from group collaboration. The script was loose and all ideas were welcomed at the table. The filming took place in one day and the editing was done in two.

"The biggest challenge was, because we were more concerned with the points than anything, was laying out this piece that had to have all of these cards that had to be worked in," said Pietsch. "We were all worried when we had to justify."

They did justify and they did win. Dozens of pieces of media were formed in the game. Some students are trying to express themselves, some students are trying to win but only one, "The Game," was making a conscious comment about how some of the students were only out to win... and they won.

The students involved with "The Game" were the week three point winners and got to go to the premiere of *Machine Gun Preacher* at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The Rewards

Reality Ends Here has a point system for the execution of media projects. Each week, a winning team is rewarded for their hard work. The rewards include:

- a trip to Museum of Jurassic Technology with alumni/game designers Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago
- a trip to a screening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford
- a screenwriting/storytelling jam with alumni/screenwriter John August at the Museum of Natural History
- a visit to Dante Spinotti's home for snacks and conversation
- a tour of the set of *Mad Men* with alumna/writer Erin Levy
- a Warner Brothers VIP tour with Bruce Rosenblum
- attendance to the premiere of *Machine Gun Preacher* at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
- a personal meet and greet with legendary director John Waters and a signed copy of James Egan's new book

