

## A Study of *The End*: Using Game Mechanics to Create Customizable Trans-Media Narratives

Our presentation explores the research and development of THE END, an interactive performance for a single audience member at a time exploring mortality and the experience of existential despair. Swim Pony Performing Arts, an experimental interdisciplinary performance company, will catalogue the work-in-progress with this paper and track the ways in which this specific work blends improvisational-based devised acting methodologies with LARP and ARG game mechanics to create an embodied narrative experience for the player. We will also look at the larger contextual scholarship and performance lineage out of which the work emerged.

The aim of THE END is to allow untrained audiences to take part in the powerful experience of generating theatrical stories while simultaneously acting as sole audience of their creation. This will result in an embodied experience of self-narrativization. Gaming offers exactly the structured mechanics to create such an opportunity without requiring lay-people to undergo the extensive education that is required in a more free-form dramatic improvisation. Games allow their authors to structure narratives and aesthetics while still keeping viewers embedded in the action rather than passively placed on the side; audiences have agency to alter the course of events, achieve success or failure, and forward the motion of the story. We are exploring how to set up such structures both digitally and with live performers who will interact with audiences to limit the variables of the narrative so that each participant will devise a cohesive but highly individualized play over the course of a month-long experience.

The piece also seeks to represent how people live their daily lives, with an emphasis on their trans-media communication in the digital realm. The experience of the world today happens as much via cell phone or computer as in real life, the physical and digital components so blended that to truly represent our full experiences, creative stories need to not just reference but fully inhabit the virtual world in addition to the physical one. THE END combines game and theater via a trans-media narrative – communicating prompts and experiences to the player through mail, phone, text, email, and in-person delivery systems – towards an outcome that offers the best of what each form has to offer.

Using a role play in which audiences agree to live as if they will die in a month, this unique “performance” blurs the line between the interiority of contemplative reflection and the exteriority of real world performance at sites across the city of Philadelphia in order to simulate and give an opportunity for a safe and “game-full” exploration of existential quandaries for a wide range of communities. “A Study of THE END – Using Game Mechanics to Create Customizable Trans-Media Narratives” will track the strains of research from game scholars that have influenced this work as well as show documentation of development and execution of a playable interactive “scene” from the piece to give fellow working group members a tangible sense of the way in which the creators are exploring authorship in relation to the choices of audience.