

SOCIALIZING WITH THE UNDEAD: HUMANS VS. ZOMBIES & LEARNING THE LIBRARY

JESSICA R. OLIN

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries can be complex and intimidating places for undergraduates, even small, liberal arts college libraries like the Hiram College Library (HCL). Despite, or more likely because of, this, learning to navigate the library is not a high priority for students. At HCL, we stumbled upon an effective method for getting past this reticence and teaching students about the library's layout: letting them run around the building, shooting Nerf guns at each other. Playing Humans vs. Zombies (HvZ) might, at first, seem a rather extreme method, but when a student is trying to find the best hiding places to avoid becoming a zombie, s/he cannot help but learn the floor plan. HvZ was more effective than anything else we have tried, and this learning was only one of the benefits we have had from socializing with the undead.

“THINKING MORE LIKE VEGAS”

Hiram College is a small, liberal arts college that is located in a semi-rural part of Northeast Ohio. The current undergraduate population is approximately 1,200, most of who live on campus. Our students are predominantly from the local area, and many of them go home on the weekends. Because of this, and a few other factors, successful outreach and programming can be a challenge – even though this is a small and relatively tight-knit campus. As a result, I am always on the lookout for inspiration and literature to support my

efforts. Behr, Bundza, and Cockrell (2007) caught my attention by stating

while academic librarians and even university administrators may assert that libraries are at the center of the educational enterprise, librarians often feel peripheral on campus. To counter this, it has been suggested that the library should take the initiative in recognizing the significant issues and developments on campus, and become involved in them. (p. 2)

This idea, of giving ourselves permission to step outside of traditional academic librarian roles, is central to my philosophy of librarianship. We all know that our students have almost ubiquitous access to information resources, especially on campus, so many of them are able to avoid coming to the physical library. Jim Morris acknowledges this problem and offers some solutions in his article, “The New Academic Library and Student Services,” by suggesting we start supporting students beyond their academic needs. He acknowledges the difficulty of adopting these new ideas and roles, but argues that it is nevertheless crucial. Academic libraries should not discard our more academic pursuits, he insists, but “we have come to understand that the social element of the library, even the academic library, cannot be ignored,” (Morris, 2007, p. 33). More recently, Brian Mathews has echoed this call. In his influential work, *Marketing Today's Academic Library*, he asks, “What do students need? My advice is to start from scratch when trying to answer this question. Forget everything you assume about the library,” (2009, p. 25). Mathews then proceeds to discuss student need states and argues that academic libraries should address as many of these needs as possible – even the need for recreation and entertainment. “Our central theme should be that the library is the place where things happen on campus, and our promotional efforts should align...,” (Mathews, 2009, p. 29).

Olin (Information Literacy/Instruction Librarian)
Hiram College [Hiram, OH]

It is impossible for a college or university library to be central if all its efforts are geared towards academic pursuits. Adding “just for fun” events, specifically gaming, is one way to fill that gap in services. To put it another way, I describe my approach to academic librarianship with a line from *Sister Act*, the 1992 Whoopi Goldberg film. When Deloris Van Cartier (Goldberg’s character) defends her secular arrangements of hymns, she says, “I was thinking more like Vegas. You know. Get some butts in the seats” (Schwartz & Ardolino, 1992). I want to get students in the library, and what we were doing before was not working, so I felt I needed to try something new – nothing disrespectful, just more attention grabbing.

“GAMING? REALLY?”

Gaming is attention grabbing. It is also a growing part of what libraries – public and academic – are doing these days. Last year, at the American Library Association’s annual conference, the Committee on Organization (COO), approved a new Games and Gaming Round Table (2011, p. 1-2). This event was the culmination of years of work and of many publications. Even a quick review of our literature shows people have plenty to say about gaming in academic libraries. *Gaming in Academic Libraries: Collections, Marketing, and Information Literacy*, a collection of essays on the topic, presents multiple perspectives. Although her focus is on video games, Sheree Fu speaks to my motivation for including gaming: “Although the academic library cannot be everything to everyone, library users are engaged by games as a medium in addition to being educated and enriched by gaming experiences” (2008, p. 93). Jenny Levine, in “The Gaming Generation,” reports the results of a survey conducted by John Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How a New Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004). These researchers learned that it is common for gamers to “bond with people who share your game experience, not your national or cultural background,” (as quoted in Levine, 2006b, p. 19). Another article by Levine, “Academic Libraries,” gives the best reason for academic libraries to including gaming: “Gaming is an opportunity for academic libraries to build relationships with students and change their perceptions of the library,” (2008a, p. 44).

“YOU WANT TO DO WHAT IN THE LIBRARY?”

One of the problems with including gaming as a way to change student perceptions is that the most obvious choices (video games, role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, or card based games like Magic the Gathering) can be expensive. Since there was an existing HvZ group on campus, and they already had most of the equipment we would need to run this event, Humans vs. Zombies seemed like a natural choice.

HvZ is, at its core, just a complicated game of tag. It was originally invented by a group of students at Goucher College in 2005 (Weed et al., n.d.b), and has been gaining popularity ever since. There are, quite literally, HvZ groups around the globe (Weed et al., n.d.a). Most versions of this game are played outdoors, so the opportunity to do something

different and play inside was enough to get the HvZ organizers on board. Playing the game indoors also meant changing the rules to suit our needs. (The HCL rules are included in this document as Appendix A.) Incidentally, changing the rules is encouraged by the game’s creators, especially when safety is involved (Weed et al., n.d.c).

We want students to enjoy themselves, but participant safety is paramount. We have rules about safe zones (bathrooms, stairs, elevator, etc.), safe behavior (no climbing, no tackling), and the need to listen to moderators. I also established emergency procedures: all moderators carried their cell phones throughout the entire game; in the event of an emergency, everyone working the event knows to first call emergency services, then me, and then the office of campus safety; although we have not done this in the past, in future iterations of the event, all participants will be required to sign a liability waiver (standard procedure on campus). Another change we plan to make will address the fact that, from what we have noticed, many of our problems come from first time HvZ players. In the future, we will have a special instruction session for people new to HvZ. We have had problems, but we take these as learning opportunities and adapt accordingly. Even still, the benefits far outweigh the issues.

“WHEN WILL YOU BE RUNNING HUMANS VERSUS ZOMBIES AGAIN?”

One of those benefits is the popularity of the program. It is one of the most popular, and successful, events that I have ever run at HCL. I could probably run HvZ once per month or more, but I have decided to host it once per semester. There was a lot of work leading up to the first HvZ, but subsequent sessions have been much easier. All the effort is worth it because of the fantastic reputation HvZ has on campus. I barely need to advertise it at all because it is so popular that word of mouth advertising seems to be all we need. (I do send emails and put up poster, which can be found in Appendix B, but most participants reported hearing about HvZ from a friend.) The drawing power of this event is such that I have even had faculty and staff ask me if they can help run it. The campus newspaper has covered HvZ multiple times. One piece quotes a participant as saying, “I really had a wonderful time. It was exhilarating! I especially (enjoyed) meeting new people,” (Lenoir, 2010, p. 7). The author of another piece, who attended the event, had this to say: “Humans vs. Zombies is a fantastic opportunity for students to engage with each other and meet new people. It is hours of endless mayhem and fun, indeed a welcome addition to life at Hiram,” (Rogers, 2011, p. 4).

It is true that the Hiram College Library is not the first library to include gaming, or even Humans vs. Zombies (Johnson, Buhler, & Hillman, 2010), but at HCL educational benefits were more a happy accident than the primary focus. The first time we hosted HvZ, the goal was outreach: I saw it as a way to build relationships with members of our community. But it was during that first session that I sensed something else happening. I saw students hiding in every nook and cranny in the building (and we have lots of nooks and crannies). That inspired me to try adding another layer to the game. One aspect of HvZ

at HCL that I have yet to discuss is the use of in-game bonuses. Bonuses are not part of the official Goucher Rules (Weed et al., n.d.c), even though they seem to have been included in actual game play (Humans vs. Zombies & Tempkin, 2008). Similarly, they are not a required part of play at HCL, but we do use them. Different sessions have included different kinds, but bonuses always benefit the person who finds them. We have had: extra lives (if a player is tagged by a zombie but has an extra life, s/he does not “contract the zombie virus” and continues play as a human), freeze grenades (when used, all the zombies in the area are not allowed to move for 60 seconds, allowing the human to kill the zombies and escape unharmed), and regular grenades (kills multiple zombies at once). This was the opportunity for learning. I took advantage of it by informing players of where bonuses were hidden by using some simple library terminology. For instance: “There is an extra life in the microforms room,” and “There is a freeze grenade in the economics section.” I was also able to integrate a bit of instruction whenever we needed to motivate players to come out of hiding: “The zombie virus has gone airborne and is drifting toward the fiction section. Any human who wanders into that part of the library will be instantly turned into a zombie.”

I have not done any formal assessment of the learning outcomes, partly because that would go against the spirit of the event, but I have been able to gather anecdotal evidence of its effectiveness. I know from student moderators that other students really seemed to be learning their way around the library. In a similar vein, the best evidence I have received came in an unexpected way – an overheard conversation:

I heard the students talking about Humans vs. Zombies... I heard [one] student say, “You really have to go to it. It was so cool, and now I know where everything in the library is. I had never even been in the library before.” (C. Dubiel, personal communication, March 22, 2012)

The overwhelmingly positive student responses are more than enough to counter any concerns. If you do decide to host HvZ (or laser tag or other similar games), you should be prepared for resistance. I have already presented some of the literature in support of gaming in academic libraries, but there are other issues that might arise. Campus shootings have made people sensitive to games that involve guns (Wexler, 2008; Young, 2008). I know I am repeating myself here, but I believe student and campus response, the improved relationships, and the learning outcomes, should be enough to overcome any resistance. Besides, as HvZ participants have said multiple times (and in saying so, they are quoting every episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in which the Borg appeared), “Resistance is futile.”

CONCLUSION

“Just for fun” events can and should be a part of the outreach, marketing, and programming efforts of any academic library. To bring this back to the metaphor of the LOEX 2012 conference, that of food, I would say that HvZ at the Hiram

College Library is a gob of peanut butter with a vitamin hiding in the center. Students came for the fun and do not realize until later that they have learned. This learning was wonderful bonus, but it all started with hosting and running social events because they strengthen relationships between library staff and the rest of the community. Strong relationships can be a jumping off point for all other instructional/education efforts, especially at a small, liberal arts college like Hiram College. If it worked this way for us, socializing with the undead can have similar benefits for any academic library.

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APPENDIX A: HUMANS VS. ZOMBIES @ HCL, THE RULES

1. As students arrive, each receives an index card that has been individually numbered. It is important that the number is kept secret (students must be informed of this as they are given their cards) because the numbers are used to select the first zombie.
2. Once everyone has arrived and understands the rules, a number is called out. The person with the card that corresponds to that number is the first zombie, or Patient Zero.
3. The main lights are turned out, leaving only the building's emergency lights.
4. The first zombie is allowed to keep his identity secret until he or she makes the first "kill."
5. To make a kill, a zombie must tag a human with both hands.
6. When a zombie kills a human, the human give the responsible zombie his or her index card. We required this so that the zombies could keep track of their kills.
7. Zombies can be killed with Nerf bullets, or with other soft projectiles.
8. When a human is killed, or when the first zombie makes his/her first kill, the newly minted zombie must return to a designated home base (the circulation desk was perfect for this) to turn in any weapons and to get an orange headband. Zombies are not allowed to lie about being zombies in order to trick humans.
9. When a zombie is killed, he or she has to return to the home base and remain there for one minute, a regeneration period of sorts.
10. There are some parts of the library that are considered safe zones where play is not allowed. This list includes stairs, elevators, and bathrooms, and the five feet around these areas were also considered safe.
11. All study rooms with doors were completely out of bounds.
12. No running was allowed in the stairs.
13. Other things that were forbidden included: climbing (especially in the stacks); melee weapons - even Nerf swords could do a lot of damage; barricading stairs or elevator doors; moving big furniture (although we allowed moving chairs and building smaller barricades in parts of the library); tackling.
14. Rules are subject to change.
15. Moderators have the final say in all disputes.
16. Play continues until all humans, save one, have been changed into zombies.

Both the zombie with the most "kills" and the last surviving human receive prizes.

**APPENDIX B:
ADVERTISING POSTER AND EMAIL**



Body of one of the announcement emails:

We've only got 7 days until the zombies are coming back to the Hiram College Library! HELP US! (for prizes & snacks)

Details:

- This event is only open to members of Hiram College community, and their guests, so have your student ID with you.
- Friday, March 23, 2012
- Event runs 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.; doors open at 8:45 pm
- The doors will be locked when 75 people arrive or at 9 p.m., whichever comes first
- Prizes and Snacks Will Be Provided
- Experienced and new HvZ players are all welcome
- No melee weapons will be allowed.
- Some soft projectile weapons will be provided, but you are encouraged to bring your own (balled up socks, Nerf guns with Nerf bullets, etc.) with you.