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Large-scale, live-action gaming events in academic libraries

How and why

First-year students are often unaware of services available at their academic library, and they are often resistant to admit their library anxiety and need for help. In recent years, academic libraries have actively identified nontraditional ways to entice new students into the library through outreach events.¹ Some academic libraries are addressing this challenge through large-scale, live-action gaming events that take place in an academic environment, but without an educational component.² Even without this component, participants are exposed to academic re-

sources and services of which they were not previously aware. These nontraditional events brand the library as a student-friendly destination and open a way for students to become comfortable in this new environment and familiar with the research and study assistance that is available to them.

This article will examine the development of successful live-action gaming events during the last four years at Wake Forest University (WFU), a collegiate university of 7,000

students in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Our events have served as models for other academic libraries' outreach efforts.³ While hosting such large events present challenges, the logistics are manageable and the cost can be minimal. Careful planning and close partnerships with other campus organizations can help effectively manage the required resources.



Capture the Flag participants.

Background

The program developed out of Friday video game nights, which were held in the library from 2005 to 2008. As those began to wane in popularity, the Z. Smith Reynolds Library (ZSR) began to explore other events to bring students into the library who were not library users. Additionally, ZSR was looking for a new way

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to introduce first-year students to the library. Tours and other traditional first-year student orientation activities were also declining in popularity.

While searching for a solution to these problems, the Division of Campus Life approached the library looking for a place for students to play Capture the Flag (CtF), an outdoor game where two teams try to capture each other's flag. The 170,000 sq. ft. ZSR Library made a perfect indoor location for CtF. With the later addition of Humans v Zombies (HvZ), these events have evolved and dramatically grown in popularity. Currently these events are offered each semester and to summer school students. WFU students recently listed them as "new traditions," and they were subsequently featured in an article in the *Wake Forest University Magazine*.

Within a year, several students who had attended CtF requested that the library host HvZ, a popular game that uses NERF blasters to ward off a zombie horde. Over time, processes were developed that streamlined these

programs to provide maximum fun with minimum staff and resources. As the popularity of these events grew, visiting summer school groups began requesting these events, which led to more events and more funding.

For the last two years, students from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) have joined the Wake Forest students for the spring event, bringing new energy and ideas. While UNC-CH may be WFU rivals in athletics, Wake students always cheer and applaud these students for making the 90-minute drive to Winston-Salem to join us.

The games

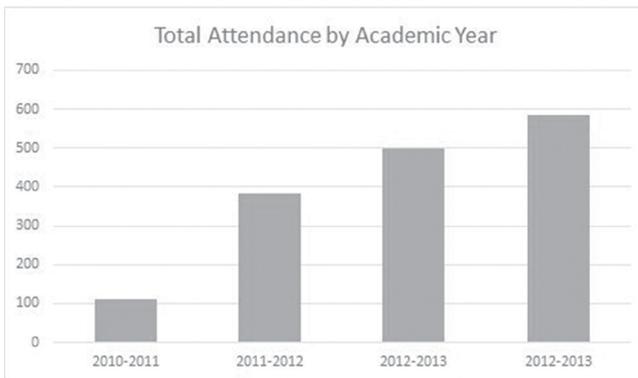
Capture the Flag (CtF)

The first game, a freshman orientation event, was attended by 75 students. Positive feedback from the students encouraged us to repeat the event in the following spring. We distributed red and blue bandanas branded with ZSR Library and Campus Life text. A public address system was set up for announcements and to broadcast music throughout the event. The evening started with food, followed by two games over the course of two hours. Staff from both Campus Life and the ZSR Library volunteered to work the event. Cleanup after the event took about 15 minutes.

Humans v Zombies (HvZ)

After a successful year of CtF, the library was

approached by a student who was looking for a venue where students could play HvZ without upsetting University Police. Recognizing that the resurgence of zombie culture could be leveraged to



Total attendance at CtF and HvZ events by year.

engage students in the library,⁴ in the fall of 2011, ZSR Library hosted its first rousing game of HvZ. A core group of regular HvZ players arrived, bringing their own blasters. However, many students arrived to play without blasters. To meet this need, the library partnered with other campus programs to supply NERF blasters for subsequent games.

The rules

Game rules are an important part of both these games, and the rules must adapt to fit the event space. CtF requires two equally sized teams and space divided into two playing fields. Each team hides its flag at

the start of the event, and the opposing team must cross over into the other team's space to attempt to retrieve the flag. Players tagged while on the opposing side must go to a designated jail space, and rules must be established regarding how long to remain and when to be released.

HvZ has fewer rules. The game begins with one or two zombies and scores of humans. The zombies get a head start and the humans use NERF blasters to send the zombies to a re-spawning area, where they pause and then re-join the game. Zombies "two-hand" tag humans to make them a zombie. The play continues until there are no humans left. The zombies always win.

Students use more strategy and stealth when playing CtF, resulting in a much calmer game overall. HvZ is really just a glorified game of tag, making it much more understandable to new players when explaining the rules. The fast pace and short list of rules make HvZ a favorite of students.

Logistics

The staff continue to make iterative adjustments and improvements to logistics. Reviewing the setting, staffing, timing, safety, trappings, and marketing keep these events fun and exciting for students.

Setting

- **Building.** How the games are structured is highly dependent on your building's configuration. The 170,000 square-foot structure at ZSR is quite unique with two symmetrical, multistoried wings connected by a six-story atrium that lends itself to a

variety of games. The atrium serves as a base of operations and neutral territory. While CtF is best played in a symmetrical structure, which allows each of the two teams a mirror image of the same space, HvZ can be played anywhere, just like any game of tag.

- **Music/PA system.** Music contributes to the energy. In addition to playing music, the PA system is used to make announcements, broadcast rules, and call players back to the neutral zone at game's end.

- **Lighting.** Students prefer low lighting, as it adds to the thrill of the chase. Try to strike a balance between thrill and safety.



Humans v Zombies participants.

Staffing

Staffing depends on the size and layout of the building. Ideally there is a staff person at the entrance, counting and confirming that participants have a student ID. Staff are needed to assist with stowing phones and backpacks for the duration of the game. A "ringmaster" makes

announcements and manages the event. Optimally, additional staff roam through the building, ensuring safety and documenting the action.

Timing

Timing is a significant challenge. These games should be held after hours, when the library is closed, but early enough in the evening to reduce conflict with other social activities on campus. The optimal date is early in the semester, before the academic demands of the semester begin to weigh on the students. Also, hosting a HvZ event near Halloween always ensures a good turnout.

Safety

Nothing will put a damper on a gaming program like injuries or security issues.

- **Emergency readiness.** Having volunteers patrol the building during the event helps keep injuries to a minimum. A roving adult presence provides a settling influence to roaming zombies (“Don’t shoot the old people!”). Have a first aid kit handy and include student emergency medical technicians to provide any first aid that may be required.

- **Post-event walk through.** Once the game is concluded, have staff conduct a complete walk through of the building to ensure that there are no stragglers. This is also an opportunity to put things back in order before the next day’s business.

Trappings

- **Food.** Pizza and sodas before and during the event are fun, but not required. A cooler of water is required to keep players hydrated.

- **Zombie makeup.** Stage makeup is a popular add-on. Use your local theater as a resource for makeup artists to transform some of the players into zombies.

- **Customized bandanas.** Participants enjoy bandanas that identify each team in CtF. While a nice take away for the players, bandanas can be replaced with painter’s tape to save money.

Marketing

- **Social Media and Print.** Use the social media resources on campus for promotion. In addition to heavily marketing the event via the library’s Facebook and Twitter pres-

ences, consider running an ad in the student newspaper the week before the event.

- **Photographs.** Students love seeing themselves in action. Post images to the library’s photo-sharing site within 24 hours of the event and announce their presence



Humans v Zombies group photo.

via social media. Take photos at a high resolution so that they can be used in library marketing efforts, such as the annual report.

Lessons learned

Tell the story

It’s important to leverage the value of the event by sharing the story quickly and widely. The

Additional information

- Link to Flickr Large-Scale, Live-Action Gaming Collection: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/zsrlibrary/collections/72157646052109976/>

- “Humans vs. Zombies”: <http://news.wfu.edu/2012/03/08/humans-vs-zombies/>

- “Zombies rule Wake Forest’s Library for a Night”: www.journalnow.com/news/local/article_c0808dc6-73e5-11e2-bd20-001a4bcf6878.html

- “Exploring New Traditions”: <http://news.wfu.edu/2012/10/31/exploring-new-traditions>

power of social media is quickly diminished with the passing of time. Students, parents, and the WFU community enjoy experiencing the event through photos and posts soon after the fact. The promptness of these postings provides the dual function of fueling anticipation for the next event, and allowing recent participants to relive the game.

Follow-up with partners

After the game night is complete, gather feedback from any partners who assisted with the event. Giving them an opportunity to give comment and identify issues ensures interest in continued partnerships.

Survey participants

One challenge is assessing the value of these undertakings. Hosting nonacademic programs in an academic library can be a hard sell. While we had plenty of anecdotal evidence that these are successful, we needed data to back up those claims.

Present participants with an optional, anonymous paper survey at the end of the evening. This measures both participant satisfaction and helps determine if these events encourage students to use the library. Post-event surveys have shown CtF and HvZ are both well liked and do encourage students to come back to the ZSR Library.

Conclusion

The Z. Smith Reynolds Library has found that

the “Capture the Flag” and “Humans vs. Zombies” big game events are exceedingly successful, low barrier ways to engage students in a nonthreatening, nonacademic way. These are models that offer some scalability for a wide variety of libraries.

With a minimal staff commitment, and a small budget, a library can provide an effective method of outreach that will encourage students who otherwise might be intimidated entering the imposing academic library for the first time.

Notes

1. Cate Calhoun, “Humans vs. Zombies at the Library: Gauging the Impact of Live Action Gaming Events on Student’s Library Use and Perceptions,” *Journal of Library Innovation* 5, no. 1 (April 15, 2014): 127–38.

2. Jamie Seeholzer, “Charting a New Course: A Case Study on the Impact of Outreach Events at Kent State University Libraries,” *Public Services Quarterly* 7, no. 3/4 (July 2011): 125–35. doi:10.1080/15228959.2011.623595.

3. Dawn Stahura and Erin Milanese, “Teaching with Zombies,” *College & Research Libraries News* 74, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 354–56.

4. Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall, “Zombie Attacks How They Can Contribute to the Success of Your Library,” *College & Research Libraries News* 72, no. 7 (July 1, 2011): 390–93. *ZZ*

15. Black Life Matters Conference at the University of Arizona, <http://www.blacklifemattersconference.com/>.

16. Chris Bourg, “Never Neutral: Libraries, Technology, and Inclusion,” Feral Librarian (blog), January 28, 2015, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2015/01/28/never-neutral-libraries-technology-and-inclusion/>. The quote in the text is from the Q&A following Bourg’s talk and is not captured in this transcript.

17. Diversity Counts, American Library Association Office for Diversity, www.ala.org/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts. *ZZ*

“Black Lives Matter!” (cont. from page 200)

13. Safiya Noble, “Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible,” *InVisible Culture* 19 (2013): <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/portfolio/google-search-hyper-visibility-as-a-means-of-rendering-black-women-and-girls-invisible/>.

14. Tutu continues, “If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality,” www.tutufoundation-usa.org/exhibitions.html.