Article

Humans vs. Zombies at the Library: Gauging the Impact of a Live Action Gaming Event on Students' Library Use and Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper describes how a game of Humans vs. Zombies was coordinated and hosted by the Ralph Brown Draughon Library at Auburn University. A survey was designed to discover students' attitudes and perceptions and evaluate whether hosting such an event was a worthwhile use of library resources. Analysis of survey results revealed value in hosting such an event as a means of orienting students to the library while increasing positive feelings about the library as a social and study space.

The Ralph Brown Draughon (RBD) Library at Auburn University is a popular campus location. The Learning Commons and the Study Commons, opened in 2010, attract thousands of students every night, and during finals the library fills beyond its 5,000-seat capacity[1]. However, with a campus population exceeding 25,000 students, not all students are regular library users. Perhaps they aren't familiar with its resources, do not know who to ask for help, or are intimidated by such a large library facility.

RBD holds an annual tailgate event in which students enjoy hotdogs and football-themed entertainment while visiting various library departments for giveaways and prize drawings. The goal is to orient students to service points. This event is consistently well-attended[2], but still only reaches a fraction of students. In an attempt at social outreach, library staff planned a game night in 2008 offering video games, board games and refreshments. Attendance was disappointing. In contrast, in 2010 an impromptu rave, a party where people gather to dance to electronic music (Evans, 1992), was coordinated by students without library staff assistance and was very popular. Students requested that we hold it again, not realizing it was not an official library event.

Students' enthusiasm for the rave indicates their interest in informal events in the library and suggests that these events are more popular if they are student-driven, as opposed to the game night which was coordinated and publicized by library faculty and staff. RBD sought other opportunities to use the library as a venue for student-centered events to reach a larger population. Some quick Web searching uncovered a recent game of Humans vs. Zombies at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University, a follow up to a very popular Capture the Flag event (McKeon, 2012). This discovery coincided with a campus-wide Human vs. Zombies event at Auburn which several hundred students registered for via a social media website. As described by the website http://humansvszombies.org, "Humans vs. Zombies (HvZ) is a game of moderated tag…. Human players must remain vigilant and defend themselves with socks and dart blasters to avoid being tagged by a growing zombie horde" (Weed, 2013). This article describes how such a game was hosted by RBD.

Literature Review

Libraries have tried a number of approaches to reach out to students in order to increase both the library's visibility and appeal. The gamification of libraries is a prolific topic, and the research describes online and virtual tools for orientation and instruction as well as outreach and entertainment. This literature review addresses only live action, role playing games, and other live game-themed events and, with one exception, will not cover virtual gaming or online instructional tools.

Much of the literature focuses on the aim of outreach events, namely, to draw more students to the library and acquaint them with library services. However, the impact of these events is often not measured. Seeholzer (2011) was a notable exception. She was interested in whether outreach events of a social nature have a negative impact on

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[1] The average daily door count during the fall term is 3,652 with it almost doubling during finals to 7112 (2013).

[2] In 2011, attendance was 2,181. In 2012, it rose to 2,429.

a library's reputation, as perceived by librarians and university staff. Seeholzer interviewed a small selection of librarians and university staff to gauge their perceptions following a year of outreach events and discovered a generally positive response. Many of those she interviewed felt that barriers between students and library staff and were reduced, resulting in a more welcoming place.

Even when the impact of such events is not addressed, reaching out to students in new and creative ways is a popular theme in the literature. Karle (2008) suggested a job, science, or volunteer fair, a blind date with a book, and hosting a mystery event, noting "one or two well-conceived and well-executed projects a year will demonstrate the resourcefulness, versatility and value of the library and its staff" (p. 142). Boulé (2009) highlighted a variety of events at university libraries across the United States and Canada, including the game-based event "The Library Amazing Race," adapted from a reality television series in which first year students compete to find and solve library-related riddles.

Individual libraries contributed to the literature by discussing their own outreach events. Calvo (2009) provided an overview of the wide variety of activities hosted in the newly-designed Learning Commons at North Carolina State University. In addition to hosting talks, workshops, and new services, the Learning Commons hosted game nights with traditional board games. Wake Forest University also hosted a game night, but instead of board games it offered popular multi-player video games such as Halo. Lured by the promise of free food, students came after hours to play games on a variety of gaming consoles on large, rented screens (Sutton & Womack, 2006).

The value of tapping into the special interests of students was illustrated by Brehm-Heeger, Conway and Vale (2007) who described their success in reaching out to the local anime club at a branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County by hosting several themed library events, including a game night and a cosplay (short for costume play) convention in which students dressed as characters from literature and popular culture.

Other outreach events incorporated both live-action and role playing games. At the Northern Illinois University Library, Snow (2008) described how hosting various role playing games such as Dungeons vs. Dragons attracted students to the library. Kirby (2003) offered a step-by-step guide to the murder mystery party in Carlton College's Gould Library in which students used library resources to find clues and solve the mystery.

The recent "uprising" of zombies in popular culture has influenced library outreach. Finch (2013); Johnson, Buhler, and Hillman (2010); and Upson and Hall (2011) discussed using the zombie trend to their advantage, describing events in which the zombie theme is incorporated into educational activities. Finch described a mock zombie invasion in which school children in Tullamore, Australia were trapped in the library with only library resources to help them escape. Johnson, et al (2010) recounted an event where University of Florida students, often in costume, found clues and solved problems with library resources in the context of a Humans vs. Zombies game.

Upson and Hall (2011) described the creation of an instructional comic book rather than a game. Inspired by the zombie trend and the Center for Disease Control's comic preparation manual for a "zombie apocalypse," they wrote and illustrated a tale of hiding in the library to stay safe from zombies and using library resources to defeat them. The comic book was so popular it was viewed more than one million times in less than two months. While not a live action game, the popularity of Upson's and Hall's comic book demonstrates that one should not underestimate the appeal of instruction or orientation when popular culture is integrated.

Live Gaming in Action

After discussing the Humans vs. Zombies game with the Wake Forest librarian who coordinated the event with students there, Auburn's First Year Experience Librarian proposed that such an event at RBD library would not only be popular, but might also positively affect students' feelings about the library. An RBD library representative approached the Humans vs. Zombies group of Auburn University who, although not an official campus group, are very organized. Because the earlier campus-wide HvZ event experienced several obstacles with campus security and complaints from faculty and staff, the Dean of Libraries, the Associate Dean, and the Building Manager met to determine if the library could accommodate such an event. Since the game could be held in an enclosed space with faculty and staff supervision, the library could offer the HvZ group the opportunity to play in the building for one night, free from the red tape they experienced in conducting the week long campus game.

We adapted the rules of the game to accommodate the library environment. Students divided into two teams – zombies and humans. Humans were armed with Nerf guns or socks. Their goal was to hit zombies with darts or socks to temporarily paralyze them. The zombies' goal was to tag as many humans as possible. When touched by a zombie, the human turned in his or her weapons and joined the zombie team. The winning team was the one with more players when time expired. All five floors were open for gameplay. Only two staircases could be used, and both were declared "safe zones" in which gameplay could not occur. We encouraged students to follow a "one foot on the ground at all times" rule to prevent jumping, leaping and climbing that would be disruptive to the library space and dangerous to students. Rather than one long game, students played three twenty-minute rounds.

We held the first HvZ@RBD event on Friday, October 12, 2012 with great success. In the week prior to the game, on the University's main concourse, members of the campus Humans vs. Zombies group registered more than 200 students. The game was run from 8pm to midnight, while the library was closed. Of the registered students, about 150 showed up to play, and about a dozen library faculty and staff members volunteered to moderate the activities. Gameplay ended shortly after 11pm, after which students were served pizza and bottled water.

Having witnessed the positive response from students, library staff discussed whether hosting these events was beneficial to the library as a whole. With no instructional component, it was unclear whether students simply saw this as something fun to do,

but having little relation to the library, or if the event increased their positive feelings about the library as well as their commitment to use it for academic purposes.

Despite the success of the first game, the library decided to let students determine if the event should be held again. Having heard comments such as "Our librarians are the best ever" and "This was the best night of my life at Auburn!" after the first game, it did not come as a surprise when the HvZ administrator asked to hold another game in the library during the spring semester. We did not offer pre-registration. Instead, students registered at the door to eliminate the necessity of coordinating sign-up tables for several days. The second game also ended one hour earlier to better accommodate the schedules of staff volunteers. We held the second HvZ@RBD on April 5, 2013.

Survey Methodology

We developed a survey of 17 questions to

- gather demographic information on HvZ participants;
- gather information about their previous usage patterns and perceptions of the library; and
- assess whether their likely use and perceptions of the library would change as a result of the event.

Students were surveyed immediately after gameplay via a paper form (see Appendix A) and sent a follow-up survey via email two weeks later. The follow-up survey was available for two weeks, and students were sent a reminder to complete it one week after the first request. We sent the second survey to ensure that responses immediately following gameplay were not overly influenced by the adrenalin rush of the live action game. The email survey offered a prize drawing to encourage participation.

Respondents

One hundred twenty-six students responded to the first survey presented immediately following the game while students were eating. This helped immensely with the response rate, though it was made clear that survey completion was not a requirement to receive food. Forty students responded to the survey emailed two weeks after the game.

At game registration, all participants provided their full names. We used this information with the university email address book to contact all participants with the follow up survey. The email message explained the purpose of the survey, the estimated time for completion, and the incentive (entry into a drawing for one of two gift cards to the university bookstore).

The majority of participants in both surveys were freshmen and sophomores, with 26% of respondents to the paper survey in their first year and 22% of respondents to the email survey in their first year. Sophomores comprised 34% of paper survey respondents and 40% of email survey respondents. Juniors and seniors comprised 38%

of the respondents and 35% of respondents to the e-mail survey. Graduate student responses comprised 2% of the paper survey and 3% of the email survey.

Survey results

We analyzed the paper and email surveys side by side. Fifteen questions that were not about student demographics were divided into three categories:

1. Student perceptions of the library before and after the game.
2. Student expectations of library offerings and future use of the library and its services.
3. General attitudes about the role of the library on campus.

Student perceptions of the library before and after the game.

About a third of the students surveyed came to the library at least once per week before participating in HvZ. Twenty-seven percent of students surveyed immediately after the game indicated that they would increase their attendance, while 45% of participants in the e-mail survey anticipated an increase.

Most students already had a very positive impression of the library prior to the game. More than 80% of students on both paper and e-mail surveys rated their overall impression of the library as very good or good. Participating in the game increased their positive feelings, with 62% of paper survey respondents and 76% of e-mail survey respondents rating their impression as "higher" or "much higher."

Student expectations of library offerings and future use of the library and its services.

A surprising number of students said they expected the library to provide this kind of event. This number declined from 50% on the paper survey to 29% on the e-mail survey, which may indicate that after some time had passed students recognized that hosting a game of Humans vs. Zombies is unusual for a library.

An overwhelming majority of students in both surveys said they were now more likely to participate in library events like this one. Immediately following the event, 90% of students chose "strongly agree" or "agree" to the statement "After this event, I am more likely to participate in library events like this," and the e-mail survey showed an increase with 94% replying in the same manner. Regarding future participation in other library events such as a game night, an optional instructional session, or the annual Tailgate at the Library event, students were less enthusiastic, but the majority still showed interest: 69% on the paper survey and 70% on the e-mail survey strongly agreed or agreed that they would attend other types of library sponsored events.

Participating in the game increased students' comfort level when using the library. Students marked "strongly agree" or "agree" at a rate of over 50% on both surveys when asked if they felt more comfortable coming to the library following the event. Students also indicated they were more likely to use the library for studying and

research than they did before the event (44% paper, 50% email), and more likely to ask faculty and staff for help (62% paper, 77% email). This positive response may be due to the number of faculty/staff volunteers whom student participants met and connected with on a more personal level than behind a reference desk or in front of an information literacy classroom.

General attitudes about the role of the library on campus.

Regarding their overall feelings about the library, students overwhelmingly felt that it was a good place to make connections with one's peers with 82% choosing strongly agree or agree on the paper survey that one can make peer connections in the library and 77% strongly agreeing or agreeing on the email survey.

Nearly all students agreed or strongly agreed that this event made them feel good about being a student at Auburn (95% on the paper survey and 99% on the e-mail survey). Eight-two percent of students on the paper survey and 87% of students on the e-mail survey agreed or strongly agreed the event helped them to see the library as an important part of campus life. Ninety-nine percent of students agreed immediately following the event, and 100% agreed on the e-mail survey two weeks later that they were glad they attended HvZ@RBD.

Additional student comments.

Students were able to add additional comments at the end of the survey. Forty-eight percent of paper survey respondents and 23% of e-mail survey respondents commented. They were overwhelmingly positive, ranging from pleading to hold the event again, to statements of thanks and gratitude to the library and its staff for hosting the event. The word "awesome" appeared a dozen times. An additional question about the kind of events students would like to see in the library did not provide relevant responses (consisting mostly of comments like "Moar Zombies ARRRRRR," "Brains," and other nonsensical answers.)

Conclusion

The survey was created to evaluate if students would enjoy an HvZ event, if it would increase their positive feelings about the library, and if it would increase their comfort level with the library. Once students had time to settle down from post-game excitement, we expected that positive reactions would decline. We were surprised to see that in many cases the percentage of students answering positively to various questions, as opposed to giving a neutral or negative response, actually increased when taking the e-mail survey two weeks after gameplay. It must be noted that the e-mail respondents, when completing this optional survey, may have chosen to do so based on already favorable perceptions of the library, which may explain the increase in positive responses.

The HvZ@RBD event required a small investment of money and human resources but delivered a large return. More than two hundred students participated, and the survey results offer evidence that the event placed the library in a new light for them. The

percentage of students indicating they now feel more comfortable in the library and were more likely to use the library for research and to ask for help was substantial.

Based on the results of this survey, the library decided that:

1. The event should continue each semester as long as there is student interest. The library will continue to stay connected with the HvZ campus group and will let it decide if the game should be run again, ensuring that hosted events have student support.

2. Other campus groups should be contacted and presented with opportunities to use the library for events, and the library should explore opportunities to utilize trends in pop culture. This will allow the library to reach a larger group of students with varied interests and offer them the same opportunity to become familiar and more comfortable with the library and its staff in an informal, non-instructional environment.

Other libraries should not discount the impact of non-instructional events in the library. Hosting an event such as HvZ@RBD requires a small financial investment (only if food is offered to the students), and just a few hours of staff time. Although students may not learn specific information literacy skills or details about library resources during the event, they will be exposed to the library space and find it a welcoming environment.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

1. My year in school is
   - ○ Freshman
   - ○ Sophomore
   - ○ Junior
   - ○ Senior
   - ○ Graduate
2. Before this event I came to the library
   - ○ Several times a week
   - ○ At least once a week
   - ○ At least once a month
   - ○ Only if I had to with my class
   - ○ I've never been here before
3. After this event I will visit the library
   - ○ More often
   - ○ Less often
   - ○ The same
4. Before this event my overall impression of the library was
   - ○ Very good
   - ○ Good
   - ○ Fair
   - ○ Neither good nor bad
   - ○ Poor
   - ○ Bad
   - ○ Very bad
5. After this event my overall impression of the library is
   - ○ Much higher
   - ○ Higher
   - ○ About the same
   - ○ Slightly lower
   - ○ Much lower
6. After this event I am more likely to participate in library events like this
   - ○ Strongly agree
   - ○ Agree
   - ○ Neither agree nor disagree
   - ○ Disagree
   - ○ Strongly disagree

7. After this event, I am more likely to participate in future library events such as Tailgate at the Library, Game Nights, instructional sessions or other library sponsored activities
    - o Strongly agree
    - o Agree
    - o Neither agree nor disagree
    - o Disagree
    - o Strongly disagree
8. What kind of events would you like to see in the library? (Check all that apply)
    - o Events for fun only
    - o Instructional events
    - o Fun events with instruction
    - o Other (please specify)_____
    _____

9. I expect a library to provide this kind of event
    - o Strongly agree
    - o Agree
    - o Neither agree nor disagree
    - o Disagree
    - o Strongly disagree
10. I feel more comfortable coming to the library now than I did before this event
    - o Strongly agree
    - o Agree
    - o Neither agree nor disagree
    - o Disagree
    - o Strongly disagree
11. I am more likely to use the library for studying and research than I did before this event
    - o Strongly agree
    - o Agree
    - o Neither agree nor disagree
    - o Disagree
    - o Strongly disagree
12. The library is a good place to make connections with my peers
    - o Strongly agree
    - o Agree
    - o Neither agree nor disagree
    - o Disagree

      o Strongly disagree
13. After this event I am more likely to ask library faculty and staff for help
      o Strongly agree
      o Agree
      o Neither agree nor disagree
      o Disagree
      o Strongly disagree
14. This event makes me feel good about being a student at Auburn
      o Strongly agree
      o Agree
      o Neither agree nor disagree
      o Disagree
      o Strongly disagree
15. This event helps me to see the library as an important part of campus life
      o Strongly agree
      o Agree
      o Neither agree nor disagree
      o Disagree
      o Strongly disagree
16. I am glad I attended this event
      o Strongly agree
      o Agree
      o Neither agree nor disagree
      o Disagree
      o Strongly disagree
17. Please share any additional comments

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