



Innovative Practice

The Library is Undead: Information Seeking During the Zombie Apocalypse

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Abstract

Academic libraries should be aware of trends in popular culture that appeal to students and design programs that engage them in participatory experiences. At the University of Florida, more than 1,000 undergraduates participate in the campus-wide alternate reality game, *Humans vs. Zombies*. Through a partnership with the game designers, librarians successfully created a library mission that allowed zombie-hunting students to apply 21st century learning skills such as communication; collaboration; critical thinking; problem solving; creativity; innovation; and information, media, and technology literacy. This article describes the development, marketing, and assessment of the game.

Zombie Outbreak!

Imagine Gainesville, Florida in early April. The air is warming, the flowers are blooming, and the living dead are lumbering across the University of Florida campus in search of fresh brains. Such was the case during the student-organized alternate reality game (ARG), *Humans vs. Zombies* (<http://humansvszombies.org>). The premise was simple. Nearly 1,000 students participated, out of a total student population of 50,691, with one

of them designated to be a zombie. The game lasted one week, and all the zombie had to do to infect humans was tag them. Zombie numbers grew, and humans did all they could to stay alive. Pandemonium ensued.

This was not the first instance of a zombie-related incident in town. Not long ago, there had been media coverage regarding the campus Information Technology Department's disaster preparedness plan for a zombie attack (Johnson, 2009). Later in the year, a local traffic sign mysteriously read "Zombie Attack!! Evacuate" (Byrnes & Voyles, 2009). It seemed that zombies were definitely on students' minds.

Reaching Out To Zombified Students

The University of Florida has an expansive campus and nine libraries. One of those libraries, the Marston Science Library, recognized the scope and success of the zombie genre and decided to get involved with the Humans vs. Zombies (HvZ) game.¹ In the past, individual libraries within the University of Florida library system have sponsored a number of pop culture themed outreach activities, such as Library Survivor, Pirates in the Library, and Murder in the Stacks (Dinsmore, 2010). Recently, these gaming activities have been very successful. For example, 500 undergraduates attended a Capture the Info Flag event in the fall of 2009. Thus HvZ gave us the opportunity to explore partnerships with established alternate reality game players.

Alternate Reality Games and Brain Food

Students involved in ARGs comprise a highly participatory culture immersed in applying 21st century skills such as communication; collaboration; critical thinking; problem solving; creativity; innovation; and information, media, and technology literacy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007). Furthermore, ARGs provide simulation experiences through which students can apply these skills in a direct, engaging way. Gaming is recognized as a pertinent way to teach new media literacies including play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, Weigel, 2006).

The Mission...

The planning had to be executed quickly—there were only six school days between the decision to hold an event in the Science Library and the beginning of the campus wide HvZ game. This short implementation time was an unexpected asset, requiring librarians to think quickly and creatively. It ensured that we did not overthink the game design or create unnecessarily complicated scenarios.

¹ Staff from libraries across campus participated in the planning of the game. The Science Library served as the physical location.

The HvZ game offered participants the opportunity to work through a series of missions or problem-based learning scenarios. Mission participation was not required by the campus moderators, but was highly encouraged. After librarians posted a Zombie Survival LibGuide (<http://libguides.uflib.ufl.edu/zombie>), the moderators decided that a library mission should be the first official event within the larger simulation. A group of a dozen librarians and library staff members met to brainstorm ideas. The group decided to focus on electronic resources that would be accessible from safe, secure locations, in case of a hypothetical zombie outbreak. During this initial meeting, two learning objectives were created:

1. Upon completing these activities students will know how to access the libraries' electronic collections, including maps, course reserves, the library catalog, and project starter databases (an easy-to-find web page linking to the most commonly used databases for undergraduates).
2. The activity will reduce library anxiety by reaching out to undergraduates and making the library a fun, approachable place.

The groups also recognized that this game had the potential to cultivate information literacy, collaboration, and participatory culture skills.

The library mission began at registration and ended with a final certification. The four activities in between could be completed in any order, but all had to be completed to gain final certification. Overall, game-play lasted one hour. Table 1 provides a description of each activity (for detailed library mission activities see Appendix 2).

TABLE 1: Library Mission Overview

Station	Activity
Registration	Register, sign film waiver.
Maps	Look at historical maps of Haiti and identify a mystical city. Find electronic maps of that city.
E-reserves	Create an e-reserves account and add a class, download the reading, and provide a citation from within that article.
Article searching	Search Web of Science for a specific article about chemical compounds used to induce zombie trances in Haiti. Report the compound.
Text a call number	Find a survival handbook in the catalog then text the call number to a cell phone. Find the book in the stacks and show your cell phone for certification.
Final certification	Get certified as "library prepared to access resources remotely" by completing all stages. Cupcakes for the first 100 students.

Given the potential number of participants and the concern that there would be bottlenecks if the players had to advance together, it was necessary to allow asynchronous advancement through stages. A coordinator for each stage designed the activity and trained volunteer staff to assist participants. The Library Instruction Coordinator of the Science Library served as the overall mission designer to make sure it flowed smoothly. At registration, players were required to provide their major and year in college, as well as sign a photo release.

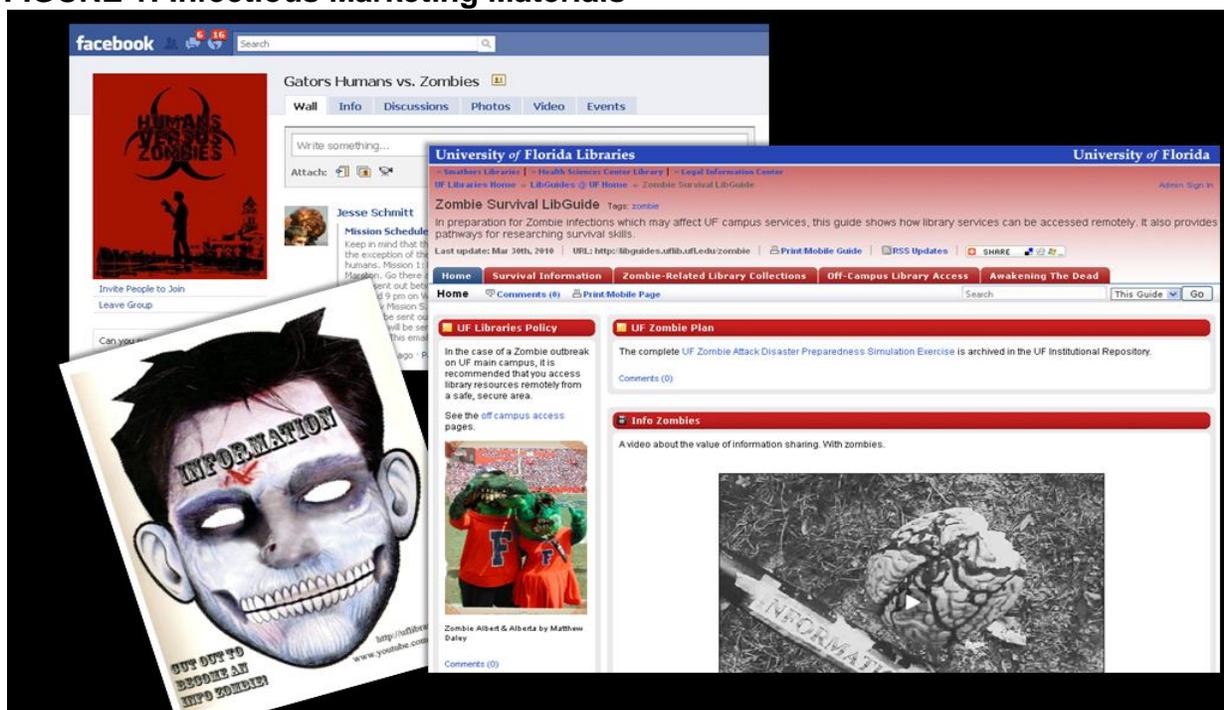
Once players completed the four resource-based tasks, they received final certification from the Associate Chair of the Science Library and a lucky one hundred participants enjoyed cupcakes and gummy brains (a.k.a. "Zombie Bait"). The Public Relations and Marketing Committee of the Library provided funding for these sweet rewards.

Infectious Marketing

A creative marketing campaign infected students and ensured widespread participation (See Figures 1 and 2). Librarians worked collaboratively to build a Zombie Survival LibGuide that detailed library resources that could be used remotely in the event of a zombie attack. It also publicized the upcoming library mission. Within one day, the Instruction Coordinator posted the LibGuide URL to the University of Florida HvZ Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=208501247736&ref=ts>).

The reaction was astounding! Students responded positively and commented not only on the post, but also on the LibGuide itself. The library also reached users through Twitter posts that hinted at the event and pointed to the LibGuide. The word spread quickly.

FIGURE 1: Infectious Marketing Materials



Printed publicity built suspense by giving limited details of the library mission. Zombie masks, posted on library entry points, gave the date and time of the event, but not much else. These masks became collectors' items for sticky-fingered students. Librarians also attended the tabling and planning meetings held by the campus HvZ moderators.

FIGURE 2: Traditional Marketing Materials

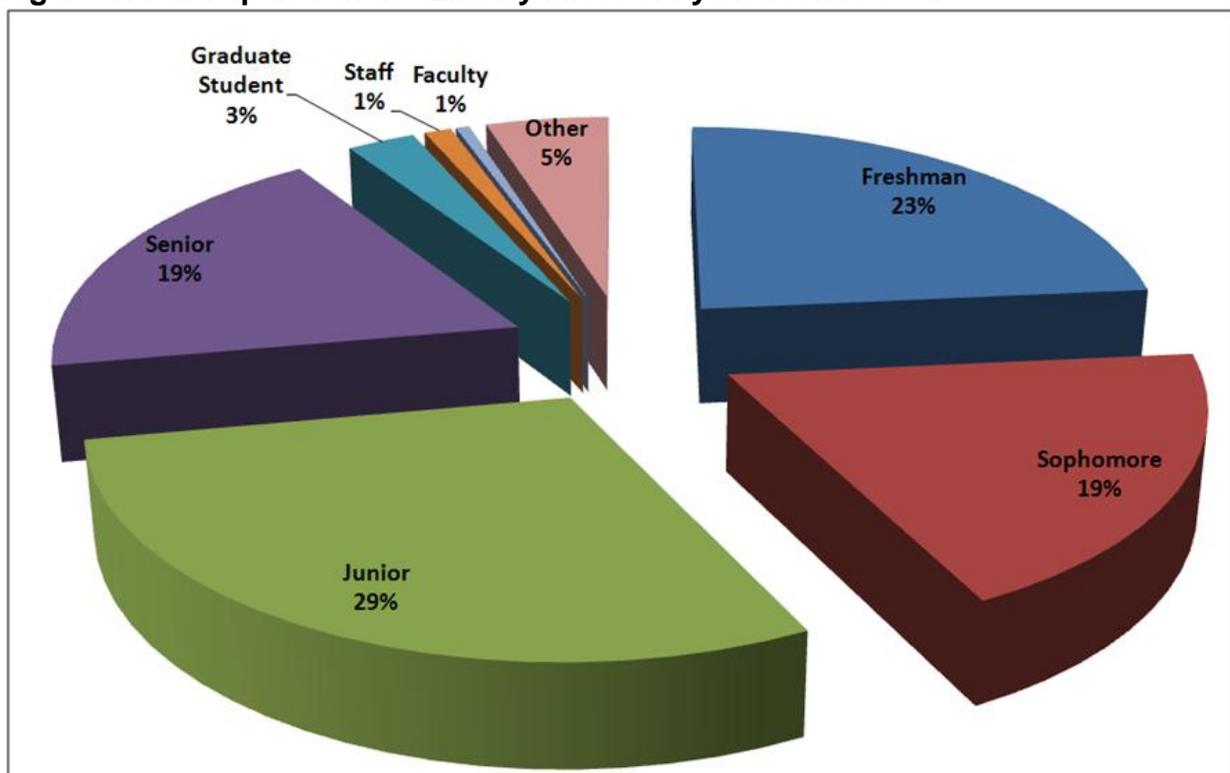


All of these techniques were fruitful, but the Web 2.0 technologies served as the event's most successful marketing tools. The LibGuide received nearly 1,000 hits within just two days of its posting.

Aftermath

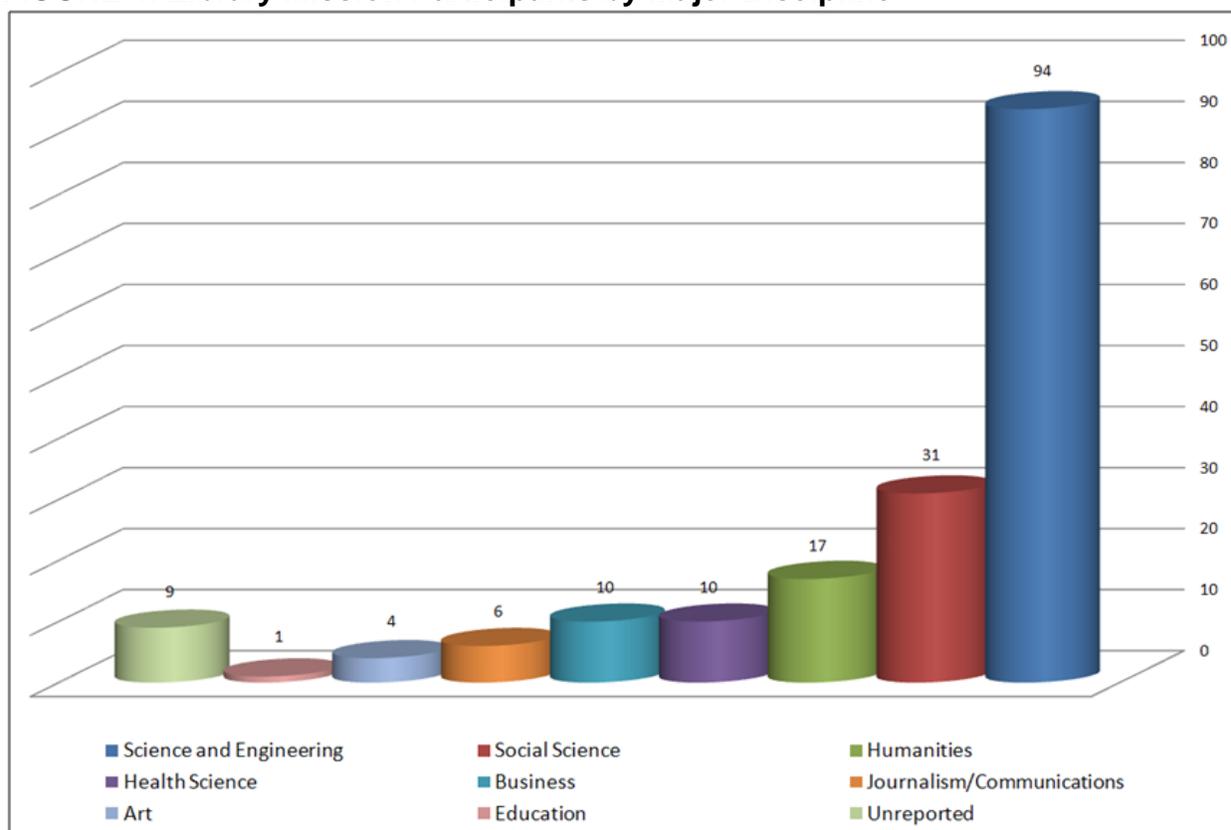
One hundred eighty three students participated in the library mission, accounting for about 20% of the registered HvZ players. The majority of the participants were undergraduates, with juniors being the highest represented group (29%), followed by freshmen (23%). See Figure 3 for detailed breakdowns.

Figure 3: Participants in the Library Mission by Academic Year



Students from all over campus participated in the event. The highest participation was among Science and Engineering majors, followed by Social Science majors (see Figure 4). Such a high concentration of science students might be due to the event's location at the Science Library or the fact that a large number of students at the University major in these areas. The bulk of the promotional materials were on display at the Science Library as well.

FIGURE 4: Library Mission Participants by Major Discipline



As mentioned in the previous section, the LibGuide, created on March 26, 2010, received a lot of hits within the first couple of days of posting. This trend continued and as of May 4, 2010 the LibGuide had 5,889 visits, 66% of which occurred in the month of April. As of September 22, 2010, the guide ranks #4 in the top 10 most popular guides for the University of Florida Libraries, with 9,550 views. Using footage from the event, we created a video called “Marston Feed Your Brains!” (Hillman, 2010). Librarians distributed this video on YouTube, the LibGuide, and Facebook.

Preparation for Future Attacks

Although game designers tested the mission with library student assistants prior to the event, there was still some confusion about advancement through activities during game-play. In the future, game design should be tested with students from outside the libraries. Another solution would be to offer a mission briefing through streaming video, in person, or online via the Zombie Survival LibGuide.

Other issues encountered during the game included answer sharing amongst the students and timeframe constraints. It was noted that a few students communicated solutions for certain tasks to other people in their squad. Some may call this cheating while others may call it creative information sharing in an emergency. In addition, the activity was only one hour long. A longer timeframe could have allowed for more players and could have reduced bottlenecks at certain checkpoints. Another drawback was that due

to the short time period available for planning and executing the game, there was not enough time to collect more in-depth data than that which is presented in this article. This precluded deep evaluation of the learning objectives. Since the library plans to repeat this game, however, there will be time to construct assessments to evaluate retention of information literacy skills.

The End: Zombie Apocalypse

Despite these issues, the overall library mission of HvZ was a victory. Students participated, they were actively engaged, and they learned essential library skills. The collaborative energy of the event contributed to its success. Synergy happened on all levels: among librarians planning the event, between the libraries and the HvZ moderators, and among the student participants. Student collaboration was particularly noteworthy. The Science Library served as an information rich environment where students playing the ARG could meet and form alliances. Because the library mission was the first large-scale activity in the HvZ many rogue mercenaries formed squads to play with for the rest of the game.

Embedding the library within the existing construct of an alternate reality game proved to be an effective way to engage students and teach traditional library skills. Furthermore, involvement with ARG players on campus allowed librarians to promote 21st century learning skills.

References

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Appendix 1: Zombie Hunters Participating in the Library Mission of HvZ



Appendix 2: Library Mission Activities

This appendix describes the activities at the six stations of the library mission: registration, maps, databases, text-a-book, e-reserves, and final certification.

1. Registration materials for the Library Mission of the HvZ Game:

At the registration table students read and signed a photo waiver that included basic information about their major and affiliation. Then they were given a mission certification card that detailed where to go for more information. Below are images of the mission certification card and photo waiver.

THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS DRAWING NEAR, AND YOU NEED INFORMATION TO SURVIVE! THIS GAME WILL TEACH YOU THE SKILLS YOU'LL NEED TO ACCESS LIBRARY RESOURCES REMOTELY, IN CASE THE UF CAMPUS IS OVERRUN WITH THE LIVING DEAD! THERE ARE FOUR PARTS TO YOUR MISSION, WHICH CAN BE PERFORMED IN ANY ORDER.

Part 1: Report to the Map and Imagery Library, located on the 1st floor. Find the large maps display case for your clue. There you will be determining the origins of the zombie outbreak.

Part 2: Report to L308 on the 3rd floor, where you will be briefed on the next phase of your mission.

Part 3: Using the online library catalog, located at www.uflib.ufl.edu, find the book 'Lethal Arrogance: Human Fallibility and Dangerous Technologies'. Text the book's call number to your mobile device using the TXT icon on the listing. With your cell phone in hand, find the book quickly!

Part 4: Report to the main circulation desk on the 2nd floor. You will receive a dossier instructing you on how to complete your mission using the electronic course reserves index.

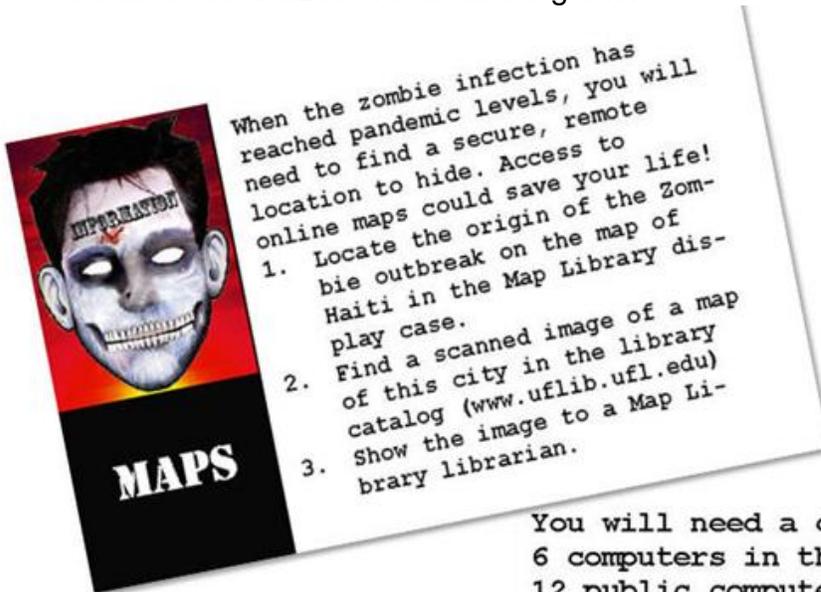
UPON COMPLETION OF TASKS, REPORT TO L107 FOR INFORMATION GATHERING CERTIFICATION

 Print Name _____
Signature _____
Major _____

Check your UF affiliation:
Fresh. ___ Soph. ___ Jr. ___ Sr. ___
Grad ___ Faculty ___ Staff ___
___ Not UF Affiliated (Public) ___

2. Maps activity materials for the Library Mission of HvZ:

The maps activity asked students to look at a topographical map of Haiti from the Caribbean collection. Once they had located a specific city, they had to find modern maps of that city in electronic format in the library catalog. A librarian verified their search and provided a stamp on the mission certification card when the activity was complete. The images below show the front and back of the business-card sized clue from the game.

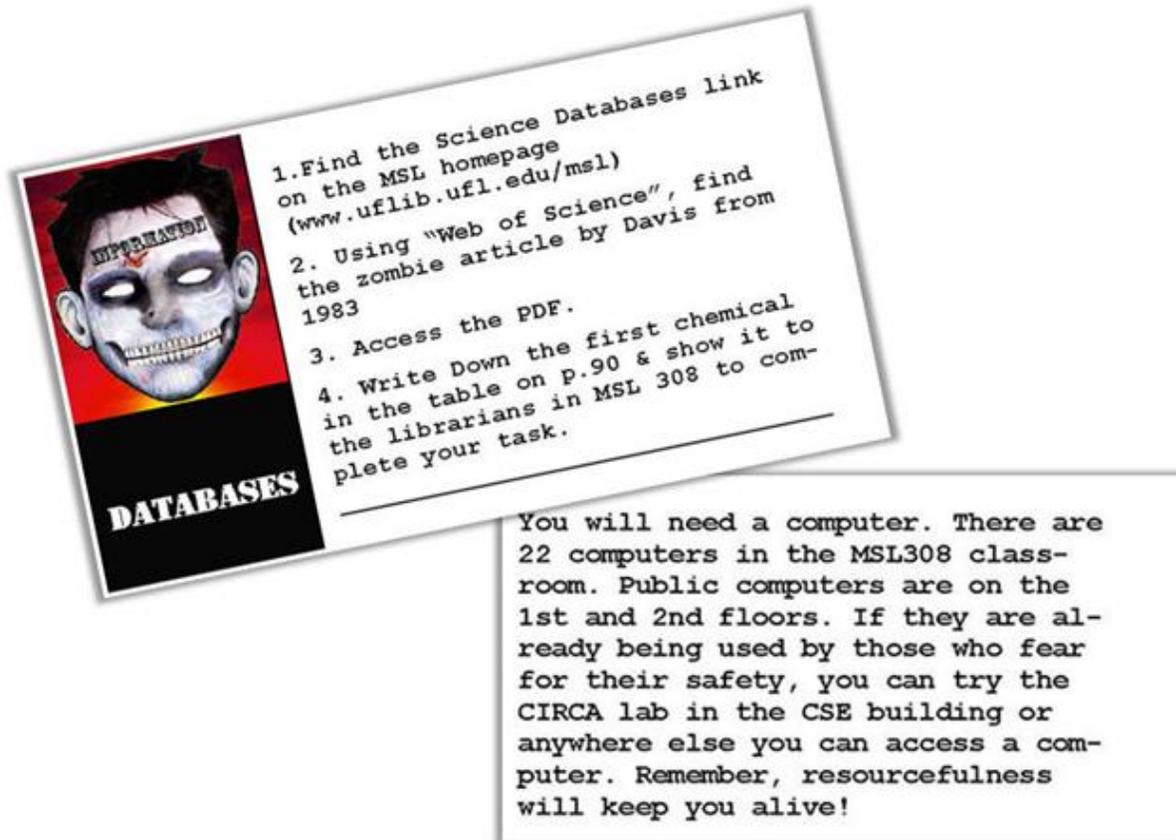


You will need a computer. There are 6 computers in the Map Library and 12 public computers on the 1st floor. If they are already being used by those who fear for their safety, you can check out a laptop. Remember, resourcefulness will keep you alive!

****THIS ACTIVITY MUST BE COMPLETED ON THE 1st FLOOR

3. Databases activity in the Library Mission of HvZ:

In this stage of the game students used Web of Science to locate a specific article. After downloading the article as a pdf, the student had to find a specific table within the article and present the information to a librarian. If they were correct, the librarian stamped their mission certification card. The image below recreates the details of the clue.



4. Text-a-book activity for the Library Mission of the HvZ game:

This activity was included in the mission certification card. "Using the online library catalog, located at <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu>, find the book 'Lethal Arrogance: Human Fallibility and Dangerous Technologies.' Text the book's call number to your mobile device using the TXT icon on the listing. With your cell phone in hand, find the book quickly!" A librarian waited in the stacks near the call number and stamped the mission certification cards of students with the call number on their cell phones.

5. E-Reserves activity in the Library Mission of HvZ:

The e-reserves activity (pictured below) required students to create an ARES account, add a class, and download a document. From that document they found a specific footnote and reported it back to the e-res station for a stamp.



E-RESERVES

When the inevitable zombie apocalypse descends upon us in a storm of blood and flesh, accessing your course materials from an undead-free location could very well keep you among the living. Use this exercise to learn how to use the library's electronic reserves remotely, since the library will be the first place zombies look for *big, juicy brains*.

You will need a computer. Marston's public computers are on the 1st and 2nd floors. If they are already being used by others who fear for their safety, you can try the Circa lab next door in the CSE building, or anywhere else you know you can access a computer. **Remember, resourcefulness will keep you alive!**

Follow the directions on the back of this card.



"I = I Hate Zombies!!!"
by practicalowl
creative commons



- 1: Log onto Marston's website at <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/msl/> and locate "services" at the top.
- 2: Click on "Course Reserves." This will bring you to the E-Reserves index, known as ARES.
- 3: If you do not have an ARES account, create one and log in.
- 4: Find "Search Classes" in the toolbar on the left and click on it.
- 5: Search by course for "ZOM1001"
- 6: Click "Add Class"
- 7: Click on the course name when the menu pops up, then click on "Zombie Attack Disaster Preparedness," then click "View this item."
8. You've successfully added a class on E-Reserves! (Note: this process works for all your classes with reserve items, even in states of non-emergency.)

In order to complete this part, tell a circulation desk staff member the name of the website mentioned in FOOTNOTE #7 of the Reserve you've just accessed. Upon receiving the website, you will receive your activity completion stamp.

6. Final Certification for the Library Mission of HvZ:

Upon completion, students reported to the final certification station. The Assistant Chair of the Science Library verified that they had completed all the tasks and gave a final stamp. The first 100 students also received cupcakes and gummy brains. Pictured below is a completed mission certification card.

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