

SLUG: ZOMBIE GAME

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UNIVERSITY PARK -- It's a brisk 30 degrees. John Mortara rubs his hands for warmth. Phil Schwartz takes practice shots with his gun. Matthew Mols paces back and forth in front of Penn State's Old Main.

These humans await their mission: Carry out a deadly task to retrieve data. Zombie hordes will stand in their way.

While the zombies are just students and they use Nerf guns, to the students of the Urban Gaming Club "humans vs. zombies" is a game of survival -- surviving boredom.

The game is growing on the Penn State campus. It began three years ago when a student saw a video of students at Goucher College in Baltimore playing it. The game has spread across the country, and 62 universities now participate.

"It started with about 100 people but most of them didn't really do anything," club member Ryan Misner said. "Now we have 140, but most are active. We're trying to get more in the future."

Game administrators Gary DeNardo, Fil Fernandes and Misner hand out the missions. The humans will spread out in three groups to retrieve data to use against the government. The government released a toxin in the air to turn humans into zombies in order to start a reality show.

Fernandes leads his group east. Once the data is recovered the groups will head back to their safe zone on the Old Main steps.

The game spans three weeks and involves missions four or five times a week, said Misner, director of Penn State's Humans vs. Zombies.

At the start, the zombies don't wear headbands and can't be identified. When they touch or tag a human, that human becomes a zombie. The Nerf guns are not allowed until after this part of the game is over. If you are shot, you are immobilized for a specific time. For this mission, it is six minutes. Additionally, humans who are "killed" are out of the mission.

The ragged group of humans makes its way across campus. They make lighthearted conversation ahead of their mission.

"I'm missing a paper for this," Mortora says, laughing.

The humans arrive at Nittany Apartments. The zombies aren't exactly in hiding. One is standing on the sidewalk; his bright orange bandana is not helping to conceal him.

"We can see you!" yells Vincent Incorvito.

"We should shoot at 'em," responds Sean Correll.

The group makes its way across the street and is informed it must retrieve a piece of data hidden somewhere in the apartments.

The zombies eye the humans closely. They are guarding the data, but could attack at any time. Now, the humans are being slowly pursued, and they know it.

Schwartz motions to Mols and Incovito to hold back. The three hide behind cars to ambush the zombies. The rest of the group, Cathy Varner, Andrew Ferri, Correll and Katherine Trageser, press on.

"Guys, we can't leave them behind," Varner says.

However, the three ambushers are successful; two zombies are immobilized.

Much of the time leading up to the game was spent getting the game's name out. The group held demonstrations, sent mail and handed out fliers.

"While we're playing, people ask questions," Misner said. "Sometimes people walk by and act as if you're not doing anything, which is kind of weird."

The group has gotten odd requests from passersby. One girl with her parents asked to have her picture taken with the gamers. Another student walked by and asked to be simultaneously shot by everyone and had it recorded on video.

As the humans search, more passersby are curious. Four students at a nearby picnic table watch intently. A girl laughs as she walks by and mutters to her friend, "I don't get it."

While it is fun, the gamers have to balance work and play. The group runs its missions at night during the week to avoid interfering with classes. While the game carries on throughout the day, gamers are safe while in class.

"We try to make it so the game never influences people's schedules," Misner said. "People's schedules influence the game. Some people take that seriously."

"As I'm talking write now, I am doing homework and have people non-stop e-mailing me about making squads," he said. "As director, it definitely affects my studies."

The search grows weary. It's been over an hour and no progress has been made. The group has circled seemingly endless rows of buildings multiple times. Then, ambush. The zombies surround the humans and attack. Ferri and Mortara are killed and are out of the mission.

As the humans press on, more zombies watch, sizing up their prey. Zombies at another ambush dispatch Incorvito. Now, one follows the remaining humans closely.

Mols chases down the pursuing zombie and shoots it.

The humans are becoming testy. They're tired and walking more slowly.

Darkness has almost entirely consumed the sky.

Then, Schwartz runs from a building and yells, "I got it! I got it!"

The chase is on.

The zombies pursue the humans quickly. The humans run for their lives, cutting through two dormitories. They think they've lost the zombie horde, but they haven't. As they reach the student center lawn, they stop and turn.

The zombies halt.

It's a standoff.

Then a zombie yells, "Charge!" The offensive, though, is quickly ended and the humans inch closer to safety.

They run to Old Main; it's almost over.

But it's a trap.

The zombies are lined up in front of the stairs. The remaining humans are confused and unsure how to proceed. They see behind the zombies one of the other two groups has made it back safely.

They realize there is only one thing to do.

Guns raised and aimed, they charge. It's a melee.

When the dust settles, the humans are on the steps, as is the third group. The humans have won the mission.

The mission may be over, but the war is not. The humans congratulate each other, but the zombies are ready for another test. They flip on the stereo and dance to “Zombie Nation” in one large huddle.

Maybe next time, the humans won't be so lucky.