

Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall

# Zombie attacks

## How they can contribute to the success of your library

**W**ow! The viral explosion of our *Library of the Living Dead*<sup>1</sup> comic was totally unexpected by any of us at McPherson College. Mike Hall and I had a great time creating it, and we had some fantastic support from our campus community, but we had no idea that it would be viewed more than 1.3 million times in less than two months. I think this speaks to the utility of creativity and innovation in librarianship. And the great thing is... anyone can do this. Anyone can generate interest in his or her library. It doesn't have to be a graphic novel. It just has to hit people in a different spot than they are used to. It has to grab their attention and be a little (or a lot) quirky. But here's the bottom line: it has to be fun. It has to be fun for the team of librarians as they create, and it has to be fun for the intended audience.

### Why a comic?

There have been resources that I created for undergrads that were dumped in the trash the second I finished my lecture. Why? They were informative. They were accurate. They were definitely relevant (assuming the student wanted a good grade on his or her research paper). So, why did my handout end up be-

ing discarded so often? I have to believe that it was because I just wasn't having fun with it. And neither were the students.

I know there are a lot of people who argue that we shouldn't coax or trick students into the library with gimmicks. When I started at McPherson College, I felt the same way. I wanted students to come in on their own initiative. Sure, I'd advertise our services, but

ultimately I believed that the inherent educational appeal of the traditional library would draw students in. But I was wrong. College students are a tough crowd. They're loud. They're scared. They're uncomfortable. They're busy. They're bored.

We had parties. We invited other campus groups to come in and hold their events in the library. It got pretty

raucous at times, and we ended up with a lot of spilled drinks and overflowing trash cans. But any frustration over the messiness and "misuse" of the library were assuaged by the



Panel from *Library of the Living Dead*. Credit: C. Michael Hall.

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success we had in drawing the students in and making them comfortable with the space. We added popular leisure books and graphic novels. We shifted some furniture around and bought a couple cozy chairs for our stacks. We asked art classes to create unique works that could be installed in the library. Students filled out surveys at a holiday party for a chance to win a Kindle. The comic guide was merely the culmination of a concerted effort to make the library a more hospitable and inviting place for students.

## How we did it

We were making progress. Students were warming to the library as a social gathering place, but they weren't truly diving into the resources just yet. We still needed a unique and interesting way to teach information literacy. I was the only professional librarian and non-student staff member, so I handled a large load of reference questions and performed one-shot library instruction sessions.

We all know that undergraduates are entering college with few information literacy skills and little understanding of the purpose or function of a library. Despite the valiant efforts of school librarians, many students leave high school without ever really using library resources to conduct research.

We have all encountered similar issues at our reference desks. Students have no idea what a peer-reviewed journal is or why Wikipedia/Google can't suffice for their research. They don't know how to use a catalog or realize that they can borrow resources from other libraries *for free*. We (and more than a few of you) simply do not have the staff to address

these questions at a broad fundamental level and in an immediate way (as opposed to the time-consuming and arduous process of officially adding information literacy standards to the curriculum). Therein lay the spark for the zombie guide.

Initially we considered making a series of short instructional films lampooning the "zombie apocalypse" genre, but being closet film-geeks, we wanted to make bigger, better movies than our microscopic budget would allow. Luckily, we had Mike Hall, a nontraditional student with a professional background in comic books and cartooning, and virtually no life to speak of (which gave him time to draw all kinds of ridiculous stuff). In comic books, the action isn't restrained by a budget. The shift from film-to-comic unleashed us



C. Michael Hall signing a comic for Jonathan Frye, Professor of Natural Science at McPherson College. Frye is featured in the closing pages of the comic as the rooftop rescuer in the hovercraft.

to do whatever we wanted—which, as it turned out, was zombify the entire staff, kill them off in hilariously inventive and educational ways, and wrap things up with a flamethrower and a hovercraft. Almost as soon as we announced the project, students and faculty expressed excitement, but once we released the finished cover art as a sort of

"teaser," seemingly everyone on campus was on the edge of their seats waiting for the book to be wrapped up and released.

The production process was fairly straightforward, beginning with a series of collaborative brainstorming sessions to work out a "mission plan" and a loose story, which Mike then turned into a script. Mike drew each page in pencil, inked it, then scanned it and added the dialogue to each page digitally. After sending the pages to a Dustin Evans—a frequent collaborator of Mike's from his days in the comics biz—for digital coloring, Mike assembled the

book and hired a print-on-demand printer he had used on previous projects to produce the finished product.

There were some creative challenges along the way, of course: capturing the architecture of the building, incorporating likenesses of students and student workers into the action, pausing to handle research questions in the middle of drawing a page...but it all came together over the span of a few months, and for a very small sum of money.

Of course, the most obvious elements of the comic are the

fantastic illustrations that Mike created. But the intellectual heft (sorry Mike) and primary purpose of the resource can be found at the back of the book. I created tutorials on Dewey, catalog searching, scholarly journals, interlibrary loan, and a basic research flowchart.

You'll notice that though I tend to be wordy, I tried to keep the style and language informal so the students wouldn't be thrown off by the already unfamiliar material.

Additionally, Mike livened up the pages by including graphics from the comic as the background for the "boring" stuff. And, yes, I made a mistake on one of the Boolean Venn diagrams...but we can easily correct that in the master file and print off corrected copies, if needed. The same goes for the actual illustrations. If the physical organization of the library changes and the comic panels no longer make spatial sense, a new panel can be drawn to replace the outdated one. The comic is very adaptable and can be used even if major changes occur at the library.

The comic was created out of necessity. We simply saw an immediate need, recognized our ability to create a fun and unique

resource at low cost, and moved forward. McPherson College's library is not equipped to perform the kind of formal assessment that is ideal in an academic library. Still, I consulted the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards prior to and during the creation of the resource.

We feel that the comic addresses Standard Two, which states that "the information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently."<sup>2</sup> Performance indicators 1 through 4 under that standard discuss

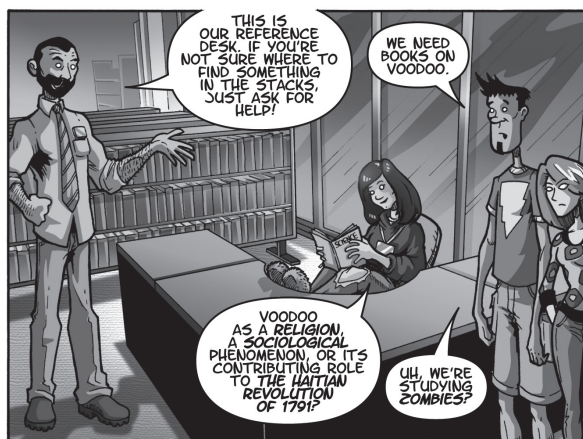
search and retrieval methods and strategies, as well as the refining of those behaviors. In our opinion, the comic is a direct attempt to inform and enable an information literate student. Of course, the formal assessment of those standards may never occur, but

we can note shifts in the attitudes of students and other campus community members.

The fact that 40 students (on a 600-student campus) showed up to our release party to get their own copies of the guide reveals a lot. Seeing them lounge around the library reading an instructional resource on their own time with no prodding tells me we did something right. We were somehow able to get a load of undergraduates to be interested in the library for at least a short period of time, and that just *feels great*. Perhaps the gut feeling has no place in an academic library, but I would argue that following one's instincts as a librarian can lead to an increased impact and relevance in the lives of students.

### An unintended result

There was no way that we could foresee the huge amount of hits the resource would have



Panel from *Library of the Living Dead*. Credit: C. Michael Hall.

in such a short amount of time. For a small college like McPherson, that kind of publicity is unheard of. Although we do not know how the unintentional advertising will work out for the school, we know that there are possibilities. ACRL's recent Value of Academic Libraries report highlights the importance of the academic library in recruiting and retaining students and faculty.<sup>3</sup> Innovative, tailored, unique resources can promote the vitality of an institution and encourage high quality prospective students and staff to seek out that place for their education or a potential job. We created the comic to appeal to our current

I hope that our guide has inspired other librarians to move forward on their own creative ideas, no matter how ridiculous they may seem. Find those on your staff or in your community who could use their talents to fuel an innovative, *fun*, and probably inexpensive project. If you can locate and harness the enthusiasm of those around you, the task of creating a vibrant library becomes much easier. My student librarian loved to draw comics and was good at it. I gave him the opportunity to run with it. That's what worked for us. Find what can work with your library. Ask your peers and patrons what they



Panel from *Library of the Living Dead*. Credit: C. Michael Hall.

students and did not anticipate the possibilities for promoting the institution as a whole.

## Conclusion

The goal of all of our experiments, including the comic, was to give students ownership of the library, to instill a sense of pride and participation. We wanted them to gain a feeling of reciprocity or even symbiosis with the library: neither of us can truly thrive without the other. I think the comic really drives this point home. As I mentioned in the introduction to the comic, the library is a place that can save your day. The storyline exaggerates this point by placing the students in a hypothetical (but *very possible*, right?) zombie attack and relying on the library and librarian to find a solution together. That interdependence is the essence of all our efforts.

would do to make the library their own, and give them ways to do it. Tell them what they *can* do instead of what they can't, and you will find that your library has more life in it than you thought. Even if most of the patrons are zombies.

P.S. I cannot believe I got to shoot a flame-thrower in the library! Of course, it was just my comic "self" doing the damage, albeit a significantly fitter version of me, but still...

## Notes

1. *Library of the Living Dead* is available at <http://blogs.mcpherson.edu/library/zombie-guide-to-the-library/> OR <http://bit.ly/gFUNmd>.
2. [www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf).
3. [www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/value/val\\_report.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/value/val_report.pdf). ♪