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Mending fences: Humans vs. Zombies Tag addresses recent concerns

The coincidental timing of the horrible shooting in Tucson, Arizona on January 8th and the scheduled start of our winter quarter game of Humans vs. Zombies Tag the following Monday could not have been worse. We were slow to fully appreciate the emotional injury inflicted by the Arizona tragedy upon our university community and the degree to which the game's presentation would aggravate that wound. We sincerely apologize to anyone who has felt victimized by our activities, especially in these sensitive weeks following the shooting.

It has never been our intention as a student organization to terrorize or antagonize any member of this community. Since its inception two years ago, Humans vs. Zombies Tag has endeavored foremost to provide games that are safe and campus-friendly. However, given the recent upwelling of concern about the nature of our games, it is clear to us that critical adjustments are necessary if our organization is to continue serving that objective.

It is our impression that much of the outcry is in response to the behavior of a handful of individuals not acting in accordance with the rules of the game. You may have already heard of some of these episodes: a blaster-wielding player stalking prey from the fourth-floor window of a stairwell in Thompson; elsewhere, another player firing darts out a second-floor window; additionally, multiple reports of players barreling through academic buildings to catch other players on the opposite side.

The common theme of these and similar episodes is that they are absolutely against the rules that those same players agreed to follow. Among our conditions is that game-related activity is prohibited indoors; as soon as players pass inside, they are expected to conduct themselves as students and students only. More importantly, however, is an overarching expectation of professionalism and courtesy that should be paid to all members of the community regardless of the setting.

We are passionate about ensuring that Humans vs. Zombies Tag has a negligible impact upon the day-to-day operations of the university and the lives of the people who choose not to participate. As administrators, we have a particularly low tolerance for players who fail to honor that commitment to non-interference. In all of the episodes described above, the offending players would have been immediately removed from the current game and possibly all future games. Unfortunately, our ability to punish problematic players is contingent upon knowing who they are. Unless we receive their names, our options to remedy the situation are severely limited.

In light of this limitation, we invite the university community to take a more active role in helping to counter undesirable player behavior. If you witness a player acting in an overly suspicious, reckless, or otherwise inappropriate manner, you should feel welcome to ask for that player's name and contact us about the incident. As long as you provide us with a name, we are able and more than willing to investigate and punish that player as necessary.

A complete solution for restoring Humans vs. Zombies Tag to a campus-friendly state does not just involve reining in or removing deviant players; adjustments to the game rules themselves

must be made. The chief focus of such changes is to clearly differentiate the appearance of dart blasters from that of real firearms.

Our present rule set already places several requirements and restrictions on the sorts of dart blasters that players are permitted to use. We require that all blasters be from Nerf, Buzz Bee, or similar toy brands which choose bright, vibrant color schemes for their products. For example, Nerf blasters typically feature bright yellow or blue plastic shells with numerous orange accents, making them easily distinguishable from real weapons as far as color. Furthermore, as is the case with all toy guns, plenty of orange is visible at the end of the barrel to further differentiate them. We also require that players not paint or otherwise recolor their blasters, even if they leave the orange accents untouched; the additional possibility of confusion is too great to tolerate.

While color schemes do much to identify dart blasters in the daytime, it becomes particularly difficult to readily discern color after dark, when silhouette alone becomes the most defining feature. Given the similarity in silhouettes between some dart blasters and real firearms, there is a considerable likelihood of mix-up at night.

Accordingly, we are considering suspending all play on a daily basis from dusk until the following morning. Restricting game activities to the daytime would ensure that dart blasters are easy to identify as such. To compensate for the varying amount of daylight present during different seasons, the exact starting time of the daily suspension would be adjusted per quarter; for example, the winter quarter game would begin its daily suspensions earlier in the day than the spring quarter game, when the daylight lasts longer.

Parallel to differentiating dart blasters from real firearms is differentiating players from armed gunmen. To this end, we are also considering prohibiting players from wearing masks or other face coverings, as well as discouraging combat fatigues and related apparel. Masks interfere with identification and promote a militant atmosphere incongruent with our goal of maintaining a friendly and secure game, so players would not be permitted to wear anything that conceals their face. Similarly, players would be discouraged from wearing combat fatigues and other clothing that they wouldn't normally wear outside of the game.

The changes described here are neither comprehensive nor final, but the first iteration of a sweeping reevaluation and revision of our policies. We are dedicated to striking a balance between safety, simplicity, and the spirit of the game. If you have particular concerns about Humans vs. Zombies Tag, we implore you to contact us and have your voice heard so that our ultimate course of action is as agreeable to as many parties as possible.

We look forward to providing quality games of Humans vs. Zombies Tag for many quarters to come. Despite competition from over 349 other participating colleges and universities in the United States, as well as across five continents, the University of Washington continues to host some of the largest, most dynamic games in the world. We are proud to offer a consistently compelling product that, for five days each quarter, brings together hundreds and hundreds of students from all walks of campus life to partake in a uniquely social and competitive recreational experience.

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