

Oh no, not I, I will Survive [DC]

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Ed is a good friend, someone I used to work with, and often time's purveyor of odd ideas - we like to keep each other on our toes. Consistently we will see movies together; occasionally a concert, and randomly I might have to drive his cat 400 miles from Rochester, NY to Washington, DC. Ed knows me well, and he knows that the crazier the idea, the more likely I am to be interested.

So it should come as no surprise that one day he sent me a link to a website advertising a sort of game taking place in an entire city - Washington, DC to be precise. The pages of the site had a black background, with black windows of white text and peppered with night-time photographs of blurry people running from some unknown thing or things, eyes wickedly glowing with the reflection of the camera flash. Ed then inquires, "So, are you interested?" It takes a few minutes for me to consider and respond.

It's a game concept called Journey to the End of Night, locally known as Survive DC. It's played all over the world in various large cities, each giving it their own flair. It's not a business concept or a professional event and there certainly aren't any sponsors. This is a grassroots event organized by people with free time looking for volunteers to help things run smoothly and the rules are simple. Get from Point A to Point B without being caught, using only your feet and the Metro train system... and do it legally!

The game starts at 7pm inside the Dupont [traffic] Circle, and by 6:30 there are already about 75 players milling around and talking about strategies with their teammates. I can tell they're playing because they all have blue grosgrain ribbons tied to their arms, like me, and are examining the map and checklist they were provided. The map indicates the starting point (Dupont Circle), the end point (a non-descript mark on the other side of town) and six checkpoints arranged in a very non-direct zigzag fashion.

Someone wearing an orange ribbon walks by and even though the organizers haven't kicked things off yet at least the mental game has begun. The orange ribbon signifies this person as a "chaser" who's job it is to run me down, ambush me, or shepherd me towards other chasers so that I can be tagged. Once tagged the game is over and I can go home, go to the end and hang out, catch a movie, OR pull out an orange ribbon from my pocket and tie it on my arm! This simple transformation is all it takes to make your teammates fear you and strangers run without even giving you a second glance.

It's a giant game of manhunt that covers 7-9 miles of roads, alleys, trains, hotel lobbies, parks and monuments and by the time we're ready to start there are around 140 players with an unknown number of chasers already staking out their territory. There are large and small teams in addition to plenty of solo

adventurers (one who drove down from Delaware despite not knowing anyone in DC or ever really visiting before) all wondering just how far from the most direct route should they go to avoid the enemy. Each checkpoint is surrounded by a fairly sizable safe zone where the chasers can't get you, giving you time to relax, drink or eat, and have your map signed by an official, but what is the safest way to reach it?

Back in Dupont Circle Ed and I don't know what to expect. It could easily be hugely entertaining and addictive, or completely and utterly boring. We're leaning towards the former, based on the player turnout (around 130 we estimate) and how well this impromptu event is organized. The maps are detailed, the checkpoints well thought out, the ribbons are top quality, and the rules, regulations and announcements are made by Tom with the use of a bull-horn. Tom is the main organizer and obviously enjoying the fruits of his labor. His remarks are funny and yet to-the-point, "I spoke with Police dispatch and they are fine with what we're doing. And, yes, if a pig stops you, they are considered a safe zone."

The game begins and most of the players begin running or jogging - some people are wearing athletic garb while the majority just look "normal". I'm wearing my typical generic shorts with lots of pockets and a button down black biking shirt that looks normal but is breathable and synthetic to battle the 70F temperature and threat of rain. Ed's in athletic shorts with pockets and a cotton tee-shirt. This is part of our strategy, to blend in with the tourists and locals. Our other strategy involves taking less direct routes and, more importantly, walking at a normal pace. We agreed early on that's it's more important to finish intact than to finish first.

For the next three hours Ed and I walk and occasionally Metro between checkpoints. We are taken down to the Mall amongst the museums and up to the White House, over towards Chinatown and up near Adams Morgan. The lack of chasers at the start lulls us in to a false sense of security that is shattered when we are nearing checkpoint 3 on the Mall. Ed is almost tagged by a chaser in ambush but the pursuit is short-lived and we easily escape. By now it's around 8pm and getting dark.

Exiting a train on our way to checkpoint 4 we find a team of two chasers tailing us covertly. Once they're spotted they give up the secrecy and simply walk along side us, chatting and telling us we're caught as soon as we leave the station. Knowing that we would meet up at the checkpoint if we were ever split, Ed goes towards one exit on the far end of the station forcing the couple to split up. The girl stays with me while the guy, still not believing that we'd really split up, follows Ed with uncertainty. For a minute all four of us waiver and wonder how this is going to play out. Exiting through the station gates and making our way to the escalator the girl and I chatted, wondering who would make a break first. If she bolted too early and ran up the escalators to meet me at the top, what's to stop

me from simply staying underground and running to a different exit? If I start running without knowing who's already at the top then I'm in trouble. There are two escalators going up and I quickly run to the left-most one while she runs to the right. Taking two steps at a time I blindly charge for the street level and make it before her. Not wanting to take the time to get my bearings I instantly stay on course and just run whichever direction is safest. The chase is over and I make my way to the checkpoint.

Pleased by my escape I am thrown off guard when I see a chaser on the opposite side of the intersection I am about to cross. I charge straight for her at a full sprint, she does the same and years of soccer experience tells me that this will only end badly for her. I am in control of this encounter and having a big intersection at my disposal I veer off at the last second and put distance between us. By now Ed is behind me and observes the chase. For a block I am sprinting, and then by the sound of my chasers footsteps I determine her pace and slow down to match hers - I'm confident I can out-last her. For several more blocks she follows and I can hear her loud breathing with pounding footsteps, but I'm coming to an intersection where I have to make a choice and I don't know whether the checkpoint is to the left or right. I stop, scan both directions, look for a clue of some kind, and when I hear her getting too close I incorrectly run the wrong way across the street.

Eventually Ed and I meet up at the checkpoint, our chasers nowhere to be seen. It's an easy, uneventful walk to our next checkpoint and from there a short distance to the Metro where we plan on catching a train up to the Northern end of downtown. Within site of the Metro Ed (with his superior vision) recognizes our chasers from the previous Metro station nonchalantly hanging out talking. A second later they spot us and move to intercept our path to the Metro escalator. Ed takes off around the building and out of site while I attempt to out-manuever these feisty predators. After a few minutes of cat-and-mouse and no progress towards reaching the Metro I decide to walk away - at the time I wasn't sure if I was leaving altogether or just lulling them in to a false sense of security by departing. On the other side of the street, obscured by a wall, lies the elevator and since nobody was continuing the pursuit I pressed the button and waited. When the doors open underground I see Ed coming down the escalators - he managed to find a second entrance.

We are now on our way to checkpoint six where we meet a foreign male gigolo with slicked hair, sunglasses, a half-buttoned shirt, and a business card advertising his services (including price list) with his phone number 703-XXX-2453. His lady friend is dolled up and wearing a pink boa, they sit together in the world famous Ben's Chili Bowl, underneath a photo of Russell Crowe. By this time we figure we're towards the end of the pack even though it hasn't yet been three hours of the estimated three to five. Figuring that most of the chasers would probably be hanging around near the end of the race, and that all the caught players would convert and do the same; we continued our route through

obscure neighborhoods and alleys. Not stopping for a tall fence outlining the Howard University Hospital parking lot we make our way to the house party waiting for us at checkpoint seven.

At 9:56pm we arrive safe and sound at a non-descript townhouse on Florida Avenue brimming with orange ribbon-wearing chasers chatting and drinking. Tom, the organizer, is inside to welcome us and offer us beverages and the sign-in sheet. We are surprised to learn we are #13 and #14 to finish and for our efforts we rank high enough to receive a homemade wooden fleur de lit pin!

A short while later we're back in Ben's Chili Bowl having grape slushees and chili half-smokes a table away from the gigolo and his lady. Through them we learn that at least 90 people signed in to the previous checkpoint and that around 40 had made it to them. Somehow, despite our strategy of walking and sparingly using the Metro, we managed to jump from the end of the pack to the front. I spoke with blue ribbons as they came in to Ben's and learned that many took this as an opportunity to be tourists and were not concerned about efficiency. Many people were unable to find their way to checkpoints and would waist time orient them. Perhaps some, worried about chasers on common routes, took drastically out of the way paths to each objective. Ed and I certainly knew the city well, and between the two of us never found ourselves lost or at a loss for direction.

We both Survived DC, and have a much better appreciation for the city and how it's laid out. We worked great as a team - with me being more familiar with the Eastern half and Ed the Western - and I for one would love to not only play the game again but do it with Ed at my side.