Chapter 1
Gaming to Learn: Bringing Escape Rooms to the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Escape rooms are live action games where “players” are locked into a room and must work together to discover clues, solve puzzles, and ultimately find the way to escape. There are currently over 2,300 escape rooms in the US. Given the popularity of escape rooms, it is no wonder they have been repurposed for the classroom to aid in student learning. Though research into utilizing escape rooms as an educational tool is still in its nascent stages, studies have provided evidence that these academic escape room activities are useful in enhancing student collaboration and communication skills and in building specific content knowledge. This chapter will explore the history of escape rooms, review research on the benefits of using escape rooms in classrooms as an instructional tool, and finally, discuss the results of the pilot test of a compost themed escape room game designed for use in middle school science classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The door locks behind you with an ominous click. You look at the 7 strangers in the room with you. You have 60 minutes to somehow find a way out. There is a keypad next to the exit. Too bad none of you know the code. You explore the room and find a wall mounted phone with no dial tone, a wooden box mounted to the wall with a small hole on top, a control panel with no electricity, a lab coat, a locked door marked ‘Engine Room’, and a table with a vase of flowers, a microscope, a projector, and a short length of copper wire. You have no idea what is helpful and what isn’t, but clues to the way out have to be here somewhere. A second round of looking reveals there is a key attached to a cork at the bottom of the wooden box, however the box won’t open, and the hole is too small to reach in for it. You find another key in the pocket of the lab coat, but it doesn’t fit in the lock on the Engine Room door. Your job is to put the pieces together, solve the puzzles, and find your way out. How will you get electricity to the control

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panel? How will you get the key out of the wooden box? What does the second key open? How will you figure out the code to the exit door? What new puzzles will you reveal along the way? The only way you’ll find your way out of here is if you work together. With another glance at the time quickly ticking away you get to work (scene adapted from The Formula; Asmodee, 2017).

It may seem odd that strangers would pay to be locked in a room together only to figure out a way to leave. Whether you consider the premise odd or not, escape room attractions have only gained in popularity since their inception (Crosti, 2017; McConnon, 2018; L. Spira, 2018), Escape rooms are live action games where ‘players’ are locked into a room and must work together to discover clues, solve puzzles, and ultimately find the way to escape.

The first escape room, referred to as ‘Real Escape Game’, was created in Japan in 2007 by Takao Kato, founder of SCRAP Entertainment (Corkill, 2009). When asked about his inspiration for creating an escape room, Kato explained it was inspired by the sense of envy he had as a child when reading novels and manga, “I wondered why interesting things didn’t happen in my life, like they did in books,” he said. “I thought I could create my own adventure, a story, and then invite people to be a part of it.” (as quoted in Corkill, 2009). It seemed he wasn’t the only one who was longing for adventures and stories he didn’t find in his everyday life. From that one room, escape rooms spread across Japan and into China, Taiwan, and other parts of Asia. Eventually escape rooms made their way to the United States when Kazuya Iwata, a friend of Kato, opened up a branch of SCRAP under the name of Real Escape Game, in San Francisco, California in 2014. Their debut escape room had over 6000 visitors in the first year (Cheng, 2014).

While escape rooms were blossoming across Asia, Europe began its own Escape Room movement. Unaware of the rising popularity of Real Escape Games, Attila Gyurkovics had the idea to create a live escape game based off of point-and-click puzzle games he was familiar with. Attila was a social worker who specialized in teamwork and often used problem solving computer games in his work (Great Big Story, 2018). He decided to recreate these games in the physical world and so created what he thought was the world’s first escape room in 2010. While it may not have truly been first, Attila’s started another wave of escape room growth, this time across Europe (Lock Academy, n.d.).

There is just something special about escape rooms, whether trying to capture a sense of adventure not found in everyday life as Kato did, or exploiting new arenas for team building like Attila. A quote from Chris M. Dickerson, founder of the British escape room company Exit Games, captures the unique atmosphere of escape rooms. When asked to describe escape rooms Dickerson, stated, “A great escape game is like seeing a magic show where you are challenged to be the magician: here’s a magic trick, there are no instructions on how to perform it but try and work out how to do it” (as quoted in McClean, 2016). With the proliferation of escape rooms, there is no doubt that the world enjoys being invited in, working as a team, and trying to perform a magic trick on the fly with only their ingenuity to help them.

**WHAT IS AN ESCAPE ROOM?**

Escape rooms are live action games where a team of players gathers clues, solves puzzles, and ultimately finds a way out of a locked room. The average team size, according to Nicholson’s (2016) survey is 4.58 people. David Spira (2015) states that a team of 4 to 8 players is a comfortable group size, and most games have a minimum of 2 players and a maximum of 10 or 12. These games are timed, and teams
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