Escape Rooms and the Seductive Ubiquity of Capture

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I had a two year stint working as an operator and game designer at an escape room in Sacramento, California. If you are unfamiliar with the escape room craze, the conceit is that a team of players are "locked in a room" – scare quoted here because in most states, it's illegal to *actually* lock people in rooms, as that's considered entrapment and generally frowned upon – typically for one hour, where they must find clues, hidden objects, and patterns in order to solve a chain of puzzles that eventually (ideally) lead the party to escape the room. Live escape games offer a set and a goal, and the players become the actors in their own participatory mystery play. Escape games as a form offer a provocative object of study because of their place at this intersection of theater and gaming. Because gaming itself is often regarded as a form of escapism, what does it mean when a game to encourages you to escape itself? In fact, the titular "escape room" marker is only ironically applicable: the party pays for a room of enclosure only; the escape is not guaranteed. Instead,

the performance space fostered by escape games generically fosters theatrical and narratological tropes of tragedy while creating a "safe" space for the curiously suburban masochistic fantasy of limitation, entrapment, and struggle. In this space, gamers play at "real"-world scenarios of masochistic entrapment, but in doing so, ironically become complicit in affirming the outside, real, world as the normative state of "freedom" to which the gamer must return.

One of the few academic works currently published on escape rooms is a short article by Scott Nicholson in *Analog Game Studies*, in which he argues that the live escape room has no definitive genealogy, and is instead the "convergence of other games and media."[1] Although I agree that escape games as a form represent the combination of these facets into a live gameplay experience, I would argue that the overwhelming similarity across digital and analog Escape Games suggests at the very least a strong rhetorical genealogy from online "escape the room" games to live action "escape the room" games. It is significant that in this trajectory, the formal shift from one that is primarily digital into one more analog and phenomenological also foments an increase in the dependence on narratological conventions of survival and tragedy.

Most of the early digital escape games were fairly simple, free to play games hosted online from independent creators. The entire game takes place in one room, typically with four walls and some limited furniture. The player is a disembodied "hand" with no functional or visible avatar. Importantly, they had little to no situating or expository text. It's unclear if these textual conventions were aesthetic or practical – limited text could potentially minimize

1. Scott Nicholson. "Emergence or Convergence? Exploring the Precursors of Escape Room Design." *Analog Game Studies*. March 2016.

translation issues, for instance – but the effect is that the earliest of these digital games had very limited narratives. Often games would offer no exposition at all, expecting the player to infer the goal from the title. Games that did give flavor text to set up the locked room were spartan, offering lines like "I wake up in a strange room" or the vaguely incriminating setup "I wake up in a strange room… What happened last night?" A perfect example comes from the 2008 game "Switch" from Neutral, a designer who released 7 escape games from 2007 to 2015. In "Switch," the textual exposition is "Somehow you are in the locked room… Escape from here," before you are dumped into the room staring at a wall. Although the genre of digital escape games did become more robust and complex over time – "Submachine" by Mateusz Skutnik is a nice example of a franchise that started out very simply as a spacial puzzle, and developed into a longer complex narrative about time travel and parallel universes – a signature component of these early games is this very limited narrative function. The impact is that the stakes of the games were unclear – escape the room *or what??* – because the real "or what" is that the player would just become incredibly frustrated at their inability to progress in lieu of any monster or villain to exact punishment on the player.

Escape rooms often look like ordinary rooms, but they hide many puzzles. "The Arcade Photography Contest" by lunajubilee @Flickr CC BY.

However, a noticeable development when looking at live action escape games is their almost unilateral dependence on a more narrative-driven ludic function as part of the immersive and theatrical experience. This is the result of two factors: the first is the need for differentiation under the pressures of market competition: live game venues differentiate themselves from and compete with other venues by having a more unique storyline. More importantly, I would offer that the legal restriction of not being able to physically lock the player in a room necessitates narrative as a tool for progressing through the puzzles. Working at the escape room, I often had to tell players that "Leaving through the emergency exit does not constitute 'winning.'" In order to convince players to suspend disbelief and participate in the collective fiction that they must escape the room, narrative becomes

integral to escape game mechanics. This also reifies the emphasis on the fantasy of entrapment rather than the fantasy of escape, which we can see through player behavior. Even after teams "beat" a game and have the opportunity to exit the room, they sometimes linger in the space over puzzles they enjoyed or found difficult, technical effects that delighted them, or prop pieces they found intriguing but couldn't find a "use" for. The variety of entrapment scenarios ranging from realism to futurism do offer rationale for escape, but they also provoke curiosity and investigation for the space itself, seemingly against instinct.

Popular escape narratives include escapes from prison, zombies, serial killers, mad scientists, bad magicians, ghosts, demons, viral outbreaks and bombs. One of the most complex and large-scale games, *The Last Defender* by Nathan Allan at the House Theatre in Chicago, invited audiences to negotiate a cold war scenario. In Allan's game, players collaborated, solved puzzles, and made group decisions to arrive at one of three possible endings: the world was destroyed by nuclear war (failure), a nuclear stalemate was achieved (success/reality), or players could agree to allow the city of Chicago to be destroyed in order to reach universal peace. In interviews, Allan has said he hoped players might make connections to debates about gun violence and gun control. Although the explicit connection from escape game to a social issue is a rarity, politicizing struggle and escape is a natural connection.

In her 2007 book *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance*, Roberta Barker offers the following definitions of comedy and tragedy: "Comedy offers a fantasy of escape from social constraints; tragedy enacts a fantasy of entrapment that allows us to see those

constraints and their effects more clearly."[2] Her pithy gloss echoes what I've heard described by designers as the predominantly "masculine" form of the Escape room. "Masculine endings" in escape rooms refers to the overwhelming dominance of "life or death" narrative stakes. The popularity of prison and horror scenarios suggests that the fantasy of entrapment is indeed both tragic and masochistic. If the escapism in escape gaming is the fantasy of entrapment itself, this fantasy is twofold: that they are entering a space that will be difficult to extricate themselves from (it isn't), and that the penalty for failure is death (it isn't). Like video games, many live escape rooms facilitate this role-play by having the player assume either a criminal element ("You have to escape before the police show up!") or an allegiance to a repressive state apparatus ("You are the police, and you have to do the thing before the bad guys show up!"). This supports a fantasy for the assumed white male subject to experience social constraints and danger like the real threat of jail, or the real threat of bodily harm. I would also argue that the fantasy extends to the player who may not inhabit the assumed white male subject position by offering not just the fantasy of danger and violence, but also the fantasy of safe withdrawal, as gamers at most venues can emergency exit if needed.

There is also a social component to this fantasy: the live venue offers escape for *teams* of players, not just the individual. Groups of players often include bachelor/ette parties, corporate departments, athletic teams, families, and groups of friends, suggesting that the game does not precisely foster an experience of *escape* but rather a transportation of known, discrete social structures into another system that is very close to recognized (if not directly known and experienced) systems

2. Roberta Barker. *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance 1984-2000: The Destined Livery*. London: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2007.

of struggle. In fact, the corporate world embraces escape games specifically because of this feature, which enables affinity groups to practice collectively operating within limited structures of limitation. If that phrase seems circular or redundant, it's because it *is.*

In order to facilitate the masochistic fantasy of entrapment and endangerment, it becomes necessary to construct a support system that monitors and facilitates ongoing consent. Using Deleuze's model of masochism as detailed in *Coldness & Cruelty* which suggests that masochism is largely contract-based, (i.e. the sadist is not the opposite of the masochist because the masochist says "hurt me" and the sadist says "no"), the masochist only wants to enjoy the specific pain that he agrees to enjoy.[3] Deleuze and Leopold Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1991. While most game venues ask players to sign a release form, the labor of care-taking on behalf of players is constant and ongoing for the entire visit. Working as an operator, I can attest that the minute players walk in the door they want to know if they will "really" be locked in, what will happen if they need to use the restroom, whether they can bring their phones in, etc. A front end "briefing" by no means prevents them all from asking these questions a hundred times, but it does the work of educating and instructing players. Once teams are in the rooms, the operator watches them play (either by entering the room with them or through digital surveillance) to make sure they don't get hurt, cause any damage or *get stuck*. While "getting stuck" for a few hours or days at a time is a normal stage of a video game, it is an unacceptable one for a business. Consensual entrapment thus necessitates the *idea* of the *possibility* of escape. This takes another form of redundancy with both the emergency exit

3. Gilles

which we might classify as a "real" but extradiegetic escape, as well as operators who can offer hints that help players work toward a diegetic escape.

In lieu of this robust caretaking device to support players as they enter into masochistic, tragic fantasy, we might wonder what potential the form of escape games offers for comedic genre. Within its capacity as a form that specifically desires to make "escape" difficult, can the escape room stage Barker's idea of comedy as the "fantasy of escape from social constraints," or can the escape room only constrain? As a Shakespearean scholar, the elaborate Rube Goldberg-esque chains of events and choices that make up theatrical comedy seem to map easily onto the escape room where you use a key you found stuck to a magnet under a table to open a panel that gives you a strip of wire that you use to fish a *different* key out of a fish tank and unlock a *different* panel that slides open to reveal a 3 digit code to open the box you found 30 minutes ago. Yet, comedic forms of escape are harder to pin down. The exceptions to the rule are largely found in the field of education. Game companies like Breakout EDU who cater to K-12 students use "escape" style puzzles to teach a range of subjects and must obviously shed the deadly stakes so common in escape games. But, these traveling puzzle games tend to likewise shed the narrative and escape function altogether.

The Houdini Room in San Francisco by Palace Games does educational work while maintaining the escape element. The game is a permanent installation at the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts. In the fictional backstory to this game, players are invited to try their hand at the "world's first escape room" designed by Harry Houdini as a challenge to eight public intellectuals (Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford, Charlie Chaplin, John Philip

Sousa, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Helen Keller, and Luther Burbank) who really participated in the 1915 World's Fair for which the Palace was built. In this story, the exposition is all front-loaded and the escape element is posed as an intellectual pursuit, not a deathmatch. However, this means that the narrative is almost disconnected from the escape. Puzzles are solved in eight tracks signifying the eight innovative thinkers, and solving puzzles along a track yields some minor additional information about each innovator, but the information does not build on the story. While the puzzles are fun and the production value is one of the best in the region, the narrative is almost too meta to make much of a genre intervention at all, since "you are a team of thinkers who want to challenge yourself with puzzles" is already the story of *any* escape room.

The Michigan National Guard celebrates victory at an escape room. "IMG_0473" by The Michigan National Guard @Flickr CC BY-NC.

Preserving the teleology of the escape while challenging the narrative material to produce different genre results has proved difficult, but there are a few small escape companies intentionally experimenting with the "feminine ending" escape games. One example can be found at Aviki Games, a small company that has pioneered mobile escape games in the Sacramento area. Their first game "Escape the Dressing Room" was a mini-game (running about 20 minutes) that involved a series of puzzles related to costume, makeup, and scripts, to symbolize the actor preparing to go on stage. The "escape," then, is to be out of the dressing room and at places *on time*. This preserves the sense of narrative that both compels action and brings it to a definite conclusion with high stakes *other than death*. Their second game, "The News Room," similarly invites players to solve journalism-themed puzzles (sports, weather, stocks) in order to uncover hot new information for a press release. Teams win the game by having one player speak into a microphone to give the press release.

What is striking about these games is perhaps easiest to see in "The Newsroom," because despite being set in a news studio, it manages to remain completely apolitical. Escape games, by nature, could easily be used to model intersections of oppression as tools to teach social justice. Anna Anthropy's digital game *Dys4ia* is an excellent model for this kind of critical game design. In *Dys4ia*, the player participates in a series of minigames that model a transwoman's difficulty getting access to healthcare, navigating microaggressions, and dealing with her own body. This system of struggle and frustration is already formally a part of escape game design, but social constraints seem to lend themselves more to the tragic fantasy of masochistic entrapment, while the comic fantasy of escape is limited in its scope. Both the Palace Games and Aviki Games examples explicitly or tacitly promote and glamorize knowledge production, technical skill, and dedication;

the brilliant innovators Houdini hopes to challenge, the actor preparing for her role, the news team steadfastly pursuing a lead, are all images that attempt to actualize the dream of the interdisciplinary humanities. These games substitute the threat of violence for the promise of individual and intellectual futurity.

The comedic fantasy of "escape from social constraints" seems to be one in which the same society just functions well and toward its own betterment, but not because it has undergone critical self-reflection, reparations, or restructuring. Indeed, perhaps that is the fantasy it offers: escape from social peril and structural violence without meaningful social change. It shares this feeling of inextricability with the tragic/masculine games in the genre. Teams make a masochistic agreement to experience constraint and attempt cooperative intellectual labor, striving for an ideal degree of interpersonal effectiveness. Rather than ludic escapism, "escape" rooms illustrate entrapments that exaggerate our embeddedness within our own systems of family, work, and relationships by offering the narrative threat of potentially losing those systems, while also relying on the team as as a microcosmic system of potential achievement.