

# CHARACTER IS KEY

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*The critical role of staff in escape games*

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## INTRODUCTION

Early escape games began with a relatively simple, if unusual, premise: lock a group of people in a room for an hour and make them solve puzzles to find the key and escape. Since their inception in the late 2000s, these live interactive experiences are evolving considerably. Sets have become more immersive and complex. Incorporation of digital technologies add dimensionality and a sense of magic. Environmental storytelling and more refined puzzles give depth to the core premise of escaping a room.

Escape games share commonalities with a range of mediums: immersive theater, interactive fiction, puzzle games, and live-action roleplaying (LARP), among others. The discourse around what makes an escape game “good” matures with consideration of these overlapping fields, and lessons learned from designing escape games and repeatedly observing player behavior offer their own unique insight. Quality in set design, the importance of narrative, and components of a well-designed puzzle are some of the most prominent subjects discussed. But while set, game, narrative, and puzzle design are all significant, staff are the keystone to a compelling escape game experience.

An escape game is created by three parties: *designer*, *player*, and *staff*. The *designer* crafts the game world and the framework of the experience. This involves a wide range of roles and elements, from conceptualization to construction, and includes designing the game roles which the staff will operate. The *players* ultimately determine the narrative and outcome of their own experience through their choices, actions and attitudes during play. The *staff* function as the bridge between the two. Staff are guides: leading players from reality into the game world, helping them navigate the game itself, and sending them back out into reality excited and eager to share their experience. As facilitators between designer and player, the role of staff at any stage revolves around adaptability and guidance: adjusting the game in response to player behavior and ensuring players successfully navigate through unfolding events. Skilled staff excel through a deep understanding of the designed game and an ability to read the players and team dynamic.

Effectively designing the roles of staff, and hiring and training staff to excel in those roles, can make or break an escape game experience. There are clear implications here for escape room companies who need customers and to make a profit. If players do not feel the experience was worth the price of admission, they have no reason to return to play another room, and may possibly be put off from playing escape games in general. On the other hand, a compelling experience will stick with them and inspire both their return and recommendations to friends. The industry as a whole can thrive if companies optimize their use of staff to fully realize the potential of their games.

In this article I will examine the different ways in which staff influence the experience before, during, and after the game to articulate their relevance and lay the groundwork for further discussion. I draw examples from my own personal experiences in the escape room industry as designer, staff, and player. Along the lines of Scott Nicholson's (2016) approach to

analyzing escape rooms, I have omitted some information in my examples in the interest of avoiding major spoilers or otherwise infringing on the potential experience of these games. However, some details are included where necessary for the purpose of furthering the discussion.

## THE ESCAPE GAME EXPERIENCE

While COVID-19 has necessitated changes to the current range of escape room offerings, in this paper the focus is on the traditional escape room experience: players are greeted by staff in a lobby or space outside of the room, are then “trapped” inside a physical room for a set period of time, and finally escape (or are released) so that they may leave the building. In this context, the designer goals are to create a compelling experience for groups of players that will leave them feeling excited and eager to discuss their experience even after they leave.

It is worth noting that, especially as the medium evolves, there are many points at which this traditional format may not apply. Players may enter directly into the game world, omitting the lobby or entry space component. There may not be a physical room, in the case of virtual escape games like Mad Genius Escape’s Zoom-facilitated *The Truth About Edith* (2020) or large-scale events like SCRAP’s stadium-size *Escape from the Walled City* (2015). In these cases, though the role and prominence of staff may differ, their presence and performance still play an essential role in the experience.

Additionally, as escape rooms mature, objectives regarding overall tone and player experience grow increasingly varied. For instance, *The Privilege of Escape* by Risa Puno and Creative Time (2019), exposed the pervasiveness of privilege and social inequity. While the objective of the player experience is less focused on accomplishment and excitement, the functionality and significance of staff remains. Ultimately, the staff are a key

component of the designed experience. The success or failure of factoring in their potential directly impacts the power of the game to convey the designer's intent.

#### A ONE-TIME EXPERIENCE

According to the narrative game taxonomy of Sullivan and Salter (2017) an escape game is a story exploration game, where “exploration is central, and finding different locations and objects is key to advancing the story” (p. 3). The act of understanding the unknown, making discoveries and solving mysteries, is at the core of the experience. With everything unveiled, much of the “meat” of the game has been consumed. This kind of experience is not inherently replayable.

Even games that strive for replayability retain the singularity of the initial experience. A paradigm of replayability in escape games is *The Hex Room* (Cross Roads Escape Games, 2016). In it, each player takes on a role from a stereotypical horror film such as the “prom queen”, the “rebel”, the “jock”, etc. Each character has a unique component and room available only to them when the game begins. Replayability comes from starting the game as a different character, so the same room can be played more than once, taking on a new role each time. However, the latter portion of the game is largely a shared experience that is not as unique with each replay. Additionally, the monetary cost of replaying can be prohibitive for many players, and makes the need for a spectacular first experience even greater.

Though the staff may run the same game multiple times a day, several days a week, the players will experience the game only once. Therefore, one of the most crucial elements of staffing a room is remembering the game is a “one-time experience” and ensuring that player experience is kept at the fore.

## PRE-GAME

### **Preparing the players**

Staff influence over the player experience starts as soon as the players enter the building. Once players enter, a few actions generally occur: the staff will greet players, have them sign waivers, and encourage use of the bathroom before the game begins. While this stage requires little in the way of skill, lack of understanding in fundamental customer service principles and the overall objectives of the company can set players off on the wrong foot.

Preparing the players also means preparing the staff. In this early phase, staff may get to know players by asking questions about their experience level, whether they all know each other, or any other inquiries to build rapport and get a better sense of both individual and team dynamic. Some players may specify preferences or raise concerns. The information staff glean early on helps lay the groundwork for their role during and after the game.

### **Setting the tone**

When the goal is for players to have fun and to leave the establishment feeling excited, then the staff need to convey one key attitude: enthusiasm. Effective staff are engaged and eager to lead players into the game. A lack of effort here puts the onus on the players to conjure excitement, but unfortunately players are not a reliable wealth of enthusiasm. Often, they don't know what they are getting themselves into, there may be understandable trepidation about getting trapped in a room, and some may have been dragged into playing as a "team building activity" for work. Some may simply be stressed and tired. Many factors may inhibit players from building energy on their own. This is made more difficult if they see staff looking disinterested.

However, if staff present the room with enthusiasm, conveying an eagerness for the players to experience it, players will pick up on that energy. Even if staff aren't actually excited, they can still signal engagement to players: smiling, standing alert, projecting their voice, and making eye contact with all players.

Most importantly, the pre-game phase is where players are transitioning from the “real world” to the “game world”, and staff guide the way. Janet Murray, in her discussion of immersion in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2017), highlights the importance of establishing a border between the real and fictional world, and framing immersion as a “visit” that “involves explicit limits on both time and space” (p. 105). Successful transition helps ensure the experience fulfills (ideally exceeds) player expectations, especially if players have come to play the game based on its thematic or narrative premise.

Staff help establish and guide players through their visit to the game world, and the transition is often physically reinforced. Introductions, rules, and any “out of game” components are explained outside the room, in the real world. Players enter the game world by entering the room and starting the timer. The point of transition makes a difference in the role of the staff as guides into the game world.

However, some games feature an introduction inside of the room. Requiring players to listen to rules and explanations within the game room, especially one designed for exploration that they will have limited time to investigate, leads to players feeling conflict between listening and wanting to immediately begin playing. There is particular responsibility placed on the staff here to achieve both pre-game goals despite the divided attention of the players: make sure the players are prepared, and ensure whatever tone is set matches the tone of the room.

Trying to achieve these pre-game goals within the room can

easily go awry. For example, I played an escape room billed as an eerie abandoned mansion the players had inherited, with allusions to occult mysteries hidden within. The introduction to this world took place inside the room itself, by way of both video on a screen mounted to one wall of the room and a staff member leaning against said wall. Both had an “out of game” tone: the video was straightforward and informative, and the staff was extremely casual. Had they occurred in the waiting area, they would not have made much impact our experience. Unfortunately, their occurrence within the room essentially used the moment of setting the tone to break it, leaving us to try (and ultimately fail) to reconstruct a mood as we began the game.

In contrast, the world of Strange Bird Immersive’s *The Man from Beyond* (2017) begins the moment the players enter the facility. Rather than having the introduction carried into the room and game world, *every* aspect of the space and staff interaction is within the game world. The premise of the room revolves around joining a psychic, Madame Daphne, in a seance to summon the spirit of Houdini. The waiting room is her parlor, decorated with strange artifacts, tarot cards, and celestial decor. Madame Daphne herself, a staff in-character, waits for players and addresses them as if they are indeed there for a seance rather than a seance-themed escape room. Here, we had entered the game world before the timer even started.

IN-GAME

### **Adapting for optimal game flow**

Staff are responsible for moderating the flow of the game. Because the game is a one-time experience players cannot pause or return to later, optimizing and adapting the flow of the game for each team helps ensure the players get their best possible playthrough of the game.

The level of control staff have over the game can vary, and the

ways in which it is facilitated ranges as well. In cases of limited control, some rooms do not feature a dedicated staff to monitor them, instead having one staff responsible for operating multiple rooms at once. Sometimes, staff only monitor or control aspects when prompted by the player through a device like a walkie-talkie or an audio or video feed of the room. In these instances, players may use the walkie-talkie or wave their arms to ask for hints or let the staff know if something isn't working. On the other hand, staff may have significant control over the game if they are in the room with players, performing a role within the game, or otherwise attentively engaged and able to manipulate various facets of the experience.

In general, staff overseeing the game is often done in-person, over a speaker, or through a screen. Depending on the skill and efficiency of the players and the quality of the room itself, no moderation on the part of the staff may be necessary. When it is, however, the staff becomes integral. These are the points when player experience can pivot, for better or worse, depending on staff and management of game flow. There are two primary means by which staff can control the experience during the game: nudging the *game* for the players, and nudging the *players* for the game.

“Nudging the game” means the staff may modify aspects of the game or room for an improved experience. If the game is designed well and resistant to technical errors, this will rarely come into play. If there is a technical error, whether a door was accidentally left open or a piece of technology malfunctions, attentive staff with an understanding of the game can minimize the impact these problems will have on the player experience, either by fixing them or utilizing an alternative.

For a puzzle in one room I ran, players needed to hear and identify homophones from an audio recording. Once, the volume was too low for players to hear. Having memorized the



recording, I was able to repeat it aloud so they could solve the puzzle quickly and as close to the way it was intended as possible. While not an ideal situation, these immediate repairs can be made on the fly if the staff are equipped and able to do so.

Subtle hinting may also be done through game modification. If staff are controlling the game from the outside, access to lighting would allow them to brighten, dim, or flicker certain lights to draw players attention. If they are inside the room and the possibility presents itself, they may be able to move something without players noticing. For instance, a room may have lot of paper puzzles or items that end up piled together. In these situations, players getting stuck is often a matter of them not visibly seeing the essential piece to a puzzle due to the design of the space or their own haphazard organization of elements. If a staff person can shift any of these so the essential piece is visible, players can quickly progress.

The most common game nudging I've experienced is controlling the game timer. In the vast majority of escape games, a timer counting down frames the time spent in the room. If something breaks, or if there are any significant errors in gameplay independent of players, general best practice is to give players extra time to complete their experience. There may also be instances where a team is on the cusp of escaping the room and need only a little extra time to succeed. If staff have the ability to do so, they may adjust the time. Here, deep understanding of the game and players affords the staff the ability to make a determination on whether or not the extra time will achieve the desired outcome. If players are not likely to succeed, it is possible the added time will only add frustration. Giving that time when beneficial, especially if it can be done without players noticing, truly makes the difference between players feeling elation and success or frustration and disappointment at the end.

“Nudging the player” means guiding the players towards or away

from certain actions for an improved experience. One facet neither player nor staff wants to experience is when players are exhibiting poor or risky behavior. In some cases, players may assume an object needs to be manipulated as part of a puzzle and try forcing it in a way that it was not meant to be used. At this point, staff may need to step in and communicate with players.

The primary and most significant means of nudging players is the act of hinting. In hinting, timing is key. With a good puzzle or mystery, frustration is necessary. Getting players close to the point of giving up without going over the edge can make the payoff of solving incredibly rewarding. Because time is limited and players cannot pause the experience, the balance of frustration is delicate. A well-timed hint can make the difference.

Some companies put this responsibility on the players: there is a way to ask for a hint, and one is given either as a prewritten hint (particularly if they need help at a common sticking point) or created on the fly by staff. Players may also request they not receive a hint unless they specifically ask for one. According to the 2018 Escape Room Enthusiasts Survey, preference was almost evenly split between asking for hints (42.9%) and unsolicited hints (43.7%) in a game (Elumir & Low, 2018). A major benefit of player-requested hints is players are given more agency in their game. If player's primary motivation is a competitive drive to win or succeed in the game, as is often the case for players highly experienced in escape rooms or for rooms that have leaderboards, this may be preferred.

However, one problem with having players ask for hints is a break in immersion. The world built up by the designers and players weakens or dissolves once players pause, perhaps calling out or waving their arms, to request a hint.

The biggest downside of player-requested hints, particularly for designers and staff, is putting a major element of game flow into

the unknowing hands of players. This is particularly relevant for new players, but even experienced players do not know what an “ideal” experience in a specific room is supposed to be. In contrast, staff have seen the room played many times, giving them experience and a deep understanding of what that “ideal” experience might be. As removed observers of the player’s behavior, they can also predict how the team may perform, coupling that with extensive knowledge of the game gives them an ability to determine the most effective timing and type of hints to give.

A balance may be struck if there is a mechanic that lets players know the staff may think they need a hint, but leaves it up to the player to take it. For example, a phone rings in the room. Players who answer receive a hint, but they can choose not to pick it up. Ultimately, the designer of the game must clearly set the framework within which staff can adapt the flow of the game.

Hinting is an art. Teachers and comics understand how to hint. In their respective fields, through lessons and jokes, they lead people up to a certain point, equip them with everything they need, but leave them to make the jump themselves. They learn the lesson, they laugh at the joke, or they continue scratching their heads. A good hint nudges players towards the “aha!” moment of a puzzle, the point of revelation, without telling them what it is. A great hint accomplishes this without the player realizing they are receiving help.

When I started working in escape rooms, I was told, “whether the outcome is good or bad, make the players feel like it’s their fault”. The players should feel like they failed or succeeded by their own efforts, not by mistakes or by “gimmes” from the game. In hinting, this means the more invisible the hint can be, the better.

In my own experience, I sometimes found the only hint needed was encouragement. There is often one person in a group who

solves a puzzle early. They are quiet, seemingly unsure. They softly say the answer, but no one listens. One of the more rewarding hints to give is to make eye contact with that person and give a small nod or smile. Most only need that small encouragement to get them to share their revelation with their team.

### **Play a role**

Staff can be incorporated into the game in a range of ways, from removed observer to central character. In general, the staff running the rooms are often referred to as Game Masters (GM), but there are distinctly different possible levels of incorporation in the game world and narrative.

The “observer” is a GM, whether physically present in the room or observing through a camera, who exists outside of the game world. They monitor the game and provide hints, but their presence is clearly that of a staff person watching the game – they play no role within the game nor do they match its theme.

Next is the “bit character”, a GM in the room who fits the narrative and theme but does not play a specific character. They serve a similar role to the observer, watching and hinting, but are better incorporated into the room itself. An example here would be a bartender in a saloon-themed game. Their presence makes sense, and enhances rather than detracts from possible immersion in the game world.

Last are “key characters”, GMs who play a central role in the game. I don’t use the term “main character” here, as that is the role of the players. In some games, these roles may be played by other staff, in addition to having a GM. They are integral to the game. Any hints they provide may be disguised as an inherent part of the interaction rather than an aside to guide the players.

Staff roles in the room can allow for nuanced hinting, game

adaptability, added dimensions to narrative, and an opportunity for unique mechanics. In-room observers have the ability to give nuanced hinting, but their presence in the room without any narrative or thematic reason can create tension for players who remain aware of their presence and foster a sense of “babysitting”. In any situation, effective fulfillment of these roles requires well-trained and skilled staff. This becomes increasingly vital for bit and key characters, as they are further embedded into the game itself.

Failure in both design and performance can severely damage the experience. One company advertised live actors as a key element of their rooms. They offered one room where players assisted a super villain in raiding a superheroes apartment to stop their “saving the world” plans. The expectation of a compelling character interaction was thwarted when we found the supervillain was a costumed person behind a glass wall. His function wasn’t clear, and when we looked over we found him inattentive. Here, the hinting and narrative were dependent on a live actor. Hints were minimal, and obvious – he only spoke to give a hint, and his removal from the game space itself prevented other means of hinting. Thus, the opportunity for nuance and subtlety was not present. Worse, we could visibly see his lack of engagement throughout the game.

The role of a “supervillain” was a compelling narrative element. The pre-game components, from website to introduction, built up the expectation of a dynamic between the players, mere henchmen, and the supervillain. This expectation broke because the actor did not utilize or build on this dynamic, and the design of the role did not support it (notably by placing the character behind glass for no clear reason). The disconnect actively lessened our game experience and dampened our engagement in the game.

By contrast, key characters designed and performed well provide

a compelling avenue to improve or expand on player experience. They also open up a range of possibilities for game mechanics. For example, a room I ran featured two key characters central to the narrative and mechanics of the game. The game was billed as a “time loop game” where players kept replaying the same moment over and over, manipulating events to create different outcomes. The player’s objective was to “save” one of the key characters, a pop star, from a range of possible deaths.

Players interacted heavily with both characters, the pop star and an officer, primarily through conversation and sharing information or objects. Though the characters followed a script, the significant degree of player influence and interaction necessitated some amount of improvisation. This allowed for modification in character behavior and response to subtly incorporate a hint as needed. The central narrative of the game was built around the pop star and their seemingly inevitable doom, and so having a person playing out this role was essential to the narrative experience. The “time loop” feature here was a unique mechanic we were able to achieve by structuring the game around key characters able to repeat or modify their actions, and the game, each loop.

## POST-GAME

Pre-game interaction sets the tone, in-game enhances the experience, but post-game sets the stage for the stories players tell. While this is debatably the least essential for ensuring a good experience, it is powerful in ensuring the experience is memorable. The post-game interaction has the power to resolve lingering frustration for players, help them digest the chaos of the gameplay and, most importantly, build on the excitement of the experience for players to carry over to discussion and retelling long after they leave the facility. These can be accomplished at two key stages: building on the moment when

the players leave the room, and concluding the experience with a debrief.

It lasts mere seconds, but the moment players leave the room is crucial. If they've escaped, having staff waiting and engaged can easily ramp up a team's sense of success and pride. They've presumably spent an hour at this point, mostly in a state of frustration, to build up to this singular moment of achieving the final objective and "winning" the game. Lack of interest or enthusiasm from staff can weaken the mood. If staff are absent when the door is opened, it can cause confusion for the players.

After the initial moment, there is an opportunity to debrief with the players. Players will likely talk amongst themselves regardless of staff involvement, engaging in what the live-action roleplaying (LARP) community has termed "froth": when participants reflectively discuss and process events of the game together after it ends (Hamilton, 2014). However, staff can help provide more depth, context, enthusiasm and space for froth through a debrief. In rooms I ran, we reviewed highlights of the game play, walking players through each major step that led them to their ultimate success or failure. This allowed players to get a more complete picture of the entire game, and helped them figure out where their personal experience fit in. There was also an opportunity here to emphasize moments unique to the team: mentioning a player who solved an essential puzzle early on, or pointing out where players were stuck the longest. The former helped build on a sense of accomplishment and gave specifics for players to continue frothing about later. The latter was particularly beneficial for failing teams, giving them a point of focus to bemoan rather than leaving them with a general feeling of inadequacy.

The importance of a debrief is even more integral if the design goal includes giving players something to reflect on after the experience. In an interview with Immersion Nation (2019),

creator Risa Puno describes how, in *The Privilege of Escape*, players were split into groups for the game and a debrief was necessary for them to get a full understanding of the game and the role privilege played in their experience. She notes players who reached out to her weeks after playing to express how profoundly it impacted them and led to later conversations with people who had not experienced the game. These responses were a testament to both the power of the game and the success of the debrief to facilitate and carry conversations beyond the game itself.

## CONCLUSION

The experience of the game and the stories players recount after are a collaborative affair. Effective escape room design accounts for the staffing of the room, factoring their role into the overall framework of the experience. Regardless of how prominent they are in the game, staff serve the essential role of mediation, adapting the game and guiding the players towards an optimal experience.

This article is an introduction to the key roles of staff in escape games. For the benefit of both designers and players, each aspect described here deserves further discussion and exploration. Escape games still have a great deal of unrealized potential. Their evolution in intent (such as designing to explore social concepts) and format (notably the recent influx of virtual escape games) signals a need to reflect on all components that comprise an escape game to deeply understand and intentionally design every layer of the experience. As escape games have drawn inspiration from a variety of other mediums, so too can these benefit from reflection on the role of staff in a co-created experience: as characters, guides into immersive worlds, moderators of game flow, and facilitators for debrief.



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