IN PRAISE OF THE MUNDANE

Time as an element of escape room design
KELLIAN ADAMS

In 2008 I worked at a company called SCVNGR and we had a mission: we were going to make the world into a game. My specific job was to make people play games at museums and in our minds, everybody was going to want to play casually with every spare moment of their day. These were the early days of apps and location-games like FourSquare, Loopt and Gowalla but the world-as-a-gamemap experiment failed and all of these location-based gaming companies closed or pivoted. Each of them made a fatal miscalculation: people who are in public are not bored, they're busy and they have somewhere to be. Casual, pervasive location-based gameplay didn't seem to catch on.

Fast forward to 2014 and Escape Rooms come onto the scene. I expected the failures of 2008. People are busy! Sure, you can capture their attention for stolen moments on mobile games. You can have their attention for hours playing video games in the quiet privacy of their own living room, but in my experience, games in the real world didn't seem to take. Escape rooms did something different from all of these location-based game apps. They sanctioned playtime. They were not pervasive and casual, they had a specific hour in which you were in the location-based game world and once that hour was up either you had accomplished your task or you had not. The escape room hour didn't squeeze yet another task into a player's busy daily world,

it gave them a full sixty minutes of respite where nothing in "the outside world" mattered. The sixty minute, finite time slot mattered.

I've seen the element of time make a huge difference in my own work as a game designer. SCVNGR went out into the world with as much marketing as investment capital could muster, but most of the products had lackluster adoption. The most successful part of the business was the "diamond dash"[1], a full-day competitive SCVNGR hunt. Jewelry stores would sponsor an event where people would compete in a timed scavenger hunt for a diamond ring. A lot of the players weren't even engaged couples. I was curious if the structure of the Diamond Dash would work for other SCVNGR products. Would people still do a location-based puzzle hunt even if there was no diamond so long as we took the structure of signups and a timed game?

I tried a new system involving sign-ups and a time limit for visitors' in-museum game experience and finally our museum games started to get some traction. We had well over a thousand people play the GoSmithsonian Trek.[2] The Joslyn Museum in Omaha built games that are still running almost 10 years later, on my own software, The Edventure Builder.[3] (Educator, Laura Huntimer even developed a program that let 7th graders build the games themselves).[4] The Indianapolis Children's Museum held a museum-wide hunt where hundreds of people showed up to a timed, one hour game. The time limit seemed to make all the difference.

John Huizinga touched about the idea of temporal spaces when he talked about "the Magic Circle" in Homo Ludens: A Study

1. https://knightnews.com/2012/10/2nd-annual-diamond-dash-allows-couples-chance-to-win-12000-diamond-ring/

2. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/happy-trekking-announcing-the-gosmithsonian-trek-137754757/

3. http://www.edventurebuilder.com/

4. https://www.joslyn.org/blog/service-learning-oh-what-an-edventure/

of the Play-Element in Culture. Huizinga wrote of "consecrated" locations for play:

"The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

The key to this for me is the comment "temporary worlds". An arena has a predictable, set time for the beginning and end of a game. A card table is a place where you sit and play cards until someone wins, not play casually forever. These game spaces are not pervasive and the times have a definitive end. When we talk about magic circles, time feels like a natural part that's easy to overlook. It's only when it's removed that we realize how important it was in the first place. It's hard to get people to commit to a game with no "consecrated" time for beginning and end. You need a magic temporal circle.

Time limits are a major element of video games and seem to be generally reviled by players. There's a Reddit page "Can Time Limits EVER be Done Well?".[5] In a Gamasutra blog post, Jack Palmer practically begs his readers to consider time limits as a positive element of video game play.[6] But the very thing that seems to be contentious in video games seems to be accepted as canon in location-based games, and may just be one of the keys to the stickiness of escape rooms.

I started thinking about why the time limit seemed to matter so much and I came up with a few theories:

5. https://www.reddit.com/r/truegaming/comments/6lskcc/can_time_limits_in_games_ever_be_done_well/
6. https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JackPalmer/20151019/256526/
   Time_for_a_timer__Effective_use_of_timers_in_game_design.php

1: SCHEDULED PLAY TIMES GIVE YOU AN OPPORTUNITY TO PREPARE PLAYERS

When we started SCVNGR museum games, initially we would approach people as they came into the museum lobby. "Wanna play a game?" They don't like surprises. Museum lobbies are stressful social situations where people often have kids, dates or families they want to impress. If you're playing a video game alone in your living room, you can fail as much as you want and there's nobody watching but a physical location is a risky social place to try something new. A scheduled appointment for a game lets us prepare players. They come in to the space at their allotted time slot as a hero, prepared to play. "I am the cool family member who prepared this adventure for us!." The difference between people expecting to play and people who just walk into a game was monumental.

2: TIME SLOTS MEAN BUY-IN

Nina Simon talks about "The Magic Vest"[7] syndrome in museums. When you're a docent, you wear the "magic vest" (or uniform). Strangers at the museum will naturally talk to you because that's the role they expect you to play but if you're wearing the same vest at the grocery store, people won't ask you about the science of water pressure. Johanna Koljonen called this an *alibi for interaction*[8] and Lizzie Stark wrote about it in "Performing the Real".[9] People need a reason to ask you a question, an excuse to play.

When you give people a time slot with a beginning and end, there's a commitment. They cannot pretend that they didn't mean to be here or that they're embarrassed that you bothered them. They can't be "too cool" for a game that they've already scheduled and paid $35 for, they've already literally bought in.

7. http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/02/magic-vest-phenomenon-and-other.html

8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXjEHDBjrXE&list=PL9nBln84JaUnG3DUQFpuW6wj9I5PCxwoC&index=2

9. http://playtime.pem.org/performing-the-real-an-essay-part-2/

3: THE "SIMPLE LUXURIES" MARKET- MOST PEOPLE CAN AFFORD AN HOUR

If you think of time as a currency, pretty much everybody you know is on the brink of poverty. When the money economy is depressed small luxuries do well.[10] Wouldn't it stand to reason that in a time-poor economy, small time luxuries would also do well? Most people can afford an hour.

If you think of that in terms of a "depressed time economy", one hour to play puzzles with your friends is an indulgence- but it's an affordable one. One hour is a simple luxury economy item- a finite indulgence that most people can time-budget for.

Most escape rooms set this time luxury at an hour but I've seen other variations. The Tokyo Mystery Circus,[11] has escape room that's only ten minutes. I thought it would be an unsatisfying experience but in fact it was really fun to race against a 10 minute clock and we were surprised by how much content we could get through. A 10 -minute escape room had a different kind of expectation: a lower price but a much higher turnover.

My own work and the pieces created by members of Boston's Playable Theater Project [12] usually clock in at about three hours. Club Drosselmeyer,[13] which looks a lot like a swing dance/variety show but has all the elements of an escape room, runs from 7:00 until about 11:00. Incantrix Productions' Carnivale Di Oscurita[14] also has a set number of puzzles that fit with a story and a three hour time limit. These are pieces that skirt the line between theater production and escape room but which have been generously accepted into the escape room community. Three

10. https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/203048

11. https://mysterycircus.jp/en/

12. https://camd.northeastern.edu/playabletheatre/

13. http://www.clubdrosselmeyer.com/

14. https://incantrixproductions.com/carnevale-di-oscurita/

hours is a relatively long time but still seems to fit within most people's expectations of a finite game.

Boda Borg[15] calls their rooms "Quests" rather than escape rooms. Many of their rooms have physical challenges rather than puzzles and while there's sometimes a story, more often it's an overarching theme. This is a really interesting way to look at traffic flow and time limits. For Boda Borg, each room is three minutes. You succeed in under three minutes and move to the next section of the room (behind a locked door) or you fail and you're spat out into the lobby to try again. This is a fascinating way to keep over 300 people busy at the same time. It's been wildly successful in London and the one US location just outside of Boston is expanding.

I've also seen rooms where time is beautifully marked. In the Wigwam Escape [16] at The Institute for American Indian Studies in Washington CT, the sun rises and sets on your experience accompanied by the sounds of morning birds, afternoon birds and crickets at dusk. Considering how important time is to the escape room experience, I'd love to see rooms be more creative about how they mark it for their visitors. This year's Club Drosselmeyer Radio Adventure marks time with a radio show and a playlist of songs. Our current design challenge is that self-directed players pause the music- and therefore the timer- for up to a half hour, which as you might imagine causes problems in the game.

Even boxed escape rooms tend to fare well with time limits. I can say from my own experience, boxed escapes with one-hour time limits have been completed and enjoyed while the un-timed ones are sitting on my shelf waiting for their moment. Time is an unremarkable constant in most escape rooms and it may be an element that's ripe for some disruption or creative engagement.

15. https://www.bodaborg.com/
16. https://wigwamescape.org/

BIBLIOGRAPHY/LUDOGRAPHY:

Boda Borg Boston, 2015, Chad Ellis, United States

Carnivale Di Oscurita, 2017, Caroline Murphy and Athena Peters, United States

Chokshi, N. (2019). 'Americans are Among the Most Stressed-Out People in the World, Poll Finds', *The New York Times,* April 19

Club Drosselmeyer, 2016, Kellian Adams Pletcher, United States

Huizinga, J. Homo Ludens: *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955. Print

Huntimer, L. (2014) Service Learning- Oh What an Edventure! featured on the Joslyn Museum Website [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://www.joslyn.org/blog/service-learning-oh-what-an-edventure/

Koljonen J. (2015) *Introduction to Narrative Experience Design (Johanna Koljonen at Alibis for Interaction 2015)* [Video] Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXjEHDBjrXE&list=PL9nBln84JaUnG3DUQFpuW6wj9I5PCxwo(

Mallenbaum, C. (2018). 'Why Escape Rooms Have a Lock on the US', *USA Today,* April 25th

Palmer, J. (Oct 19, 2015). Time for a timer! Effective use of timers in game design featured on Gamasutra [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JackPalmer/20151019/256526/Time_for_a_timer__Effective_use_of_timers_in_game_design.php/

Simon, N. (Feb 18 2009) The Magic Vest and Other Wearable Tools for Talking to Strangers featured on Museum 2.0 [Blog Post]. Retrieved from http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/02/magic-vest-phenomenon-and-other.html/

Stark L. (2017) Performing the Real: An Essay featured on Playtime at the Peabody Essex Museum [Blog Post]. Retrieved at http://playtime.pem.org/performing-the-real-an-essay-part-2.html/

Reinink, A. (2009). 'Simple Luxuries Thrive in a Depressed Economy', *Entrepreneur Magazine,* August

Scrap, 2010, Takao Kato, Japan

SCVNGR, 2008, Seth Priebatsch, United States

Tokyo Mystery Circus, 2017, Takao Kato, Japan

The Go Smithsonian Trek, 2010, Kellian Adams Pletcher, United States

The MIT Mystery Hunt, 1981, Brad Schaefer, United States

Usborne, S. (2019). 'Get Me Out of Here: Why Escape Rooms Have Become a Global Craze' *The Guardian,* April 1

Wigwam Escape, 2018, The Institute for American Indian Studies, United States