

# Applying Escape Room Game Concepts to Informal Learning: *Operation Sabotage Stanwix!*

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**Short Game Description:** Escape Room games are live action games where players work together in an enclosed space to discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks to reach a goal in a limited time. This game, *Operation Sabotage Stanwix*, has players working as British agents discovering what parts of Fort Stanwix are vulnerable to aid an American prisoner in sabotaging the Fort.

## Overview of Escape Rooms

Escape Rooms are live action games where players work together in an enclosed space to discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks to reach a goal (usually unlocking a door and escaping the room) in a limited time (Nicholson, 2015). The lineage of the Escape Room genre can be traced to two other gaming genres—live action role playing games and point-and-click adventure games. Escape Rooms capture the excitement of being in a live action game; some advertise themselves as “live video games”. Live action roleplaying games have been running since the 1970’s as a way of making tabletop roleplaying games more immersive. Many of the aspects of a live action roleplaying game are in Escape Rooms—players are put into a situation, they may be part of a narrative, and engage with a physical world to take on challenges while a gamemaster ensures safety and helps the players to have an engaging experience. While most Escape Rooms do not require players to do roleplaying or engage in mock physical combat, the magic of live action gaming builds engagement and excitement during an Escape Room experience.

Many of the core game mechanisms of Escape Rooms come from point-and-click adventure games. Players have to search the space to locate items. Combining different items gives players the ability to solve puzzles, many of which have no directions. As they solve puzzles, they use those answers to move into other parts of the game. They may also be challenged with physical tasks, akin to action sequences in adventure games. In the mid-2000s, the genre of web-based escape-the-room games became the modern implementation of point-and-click adventure games. Combining these concepts creates the Escape Rooms that are rapidly spreading around the world today (Nicholson, 2015).

The amount to which these Escape Rooms embrace a narrative varies greatly by the room. Some rooms have no theme other than “Escape the Room,” and players are presented a series of themeless puzzles to solve. Many rooms have a theme, such as horror, mystery, or military. But while these rooms may have a theme, many times the puzzles do not fit within the overall theme of the room. Finally, some rooms have a meaningful narrative; where there is a theme, the players are in a specific role, and the puzzles all make sense as existing within the space and narrative (Nicholson, 2015).

## Applying Escape Room Game Concepts to Informal Learning

While there are learning outcomes of all Escape Rooms surrounding teamwork, communication, observation, and logical thinking, these games can also have a learning connection to a topic. Some are set in historical settings, such as Escapology’s *Cuban Crisis*, where players have an hour inside Fidel Castro’s offices to learn what kind of orders have been given. *Museum Escape: The Polar Domes* was a pop-up Escape Room produced by Rosie Amos from the Polar Museum and Nicola Skipper at the Sedgwick Museum, both part of the University of Cambridge (UK). In *The Polar Domes*, the players are finding the hidden research of a polar geologist who is afraid that her work is being suppressed by others (Amos & Skipper, 2014). *Memori* was a pop-up Escape Room run at the State Library of Australia and designed by Games We Play and Excalibur productions that had players exploring stories from Western Australia history (*Memori*, 2014).

Because Escape Room games create moments of intense engagement with a topic and a physical space, they are good models for places of informal learning like museums, libraries, and in the case of Fort Stanwix, a national monument featuring a military fort. We developed and ran this pop-up Escape Room all day at the Fort on June 13, 2015 with teams running each half hour.

## Case Study: *Operation Sabotage Stanwix*

Fort Stanwix National Monument, located in Rome, New York, was a military fort important during the French and Indian war and the Revolutionary war. It is now part of the National Parks service and its staff wants to create new services that bring the Fort to life for visitors. The design goal of the Escape Room at Fort Stanwix was to maintain the gold standard of design for an Escape Room for informal learning—that the narrative behind the room be based upon reality, the puzzles lead to authentic learning outcomes about the topic, and that the puzzles fit within the reality of the narrative. In order for an escape from American-held Fort Stanwix to make the most sense, the players would need to be on the side of the British while trying to escape from the Fort. During the initial brainstorming, interpreters at Fort Stanwix located a story of an American prisoner in the fort who was planning to sabotage the fort and cause a mass desertion in exchange for an officer rank in the British Army. This concept provided the starting point for the narrative of the game.

The players are working for the British army, and have a list of potential sabotages for the Fort. They have learned through intelligence that suspicions have been raised and preparations have begun to increase the security and safety within the Fort. The team's job is to sneak into the Quartermaster's Office, find the plans for added security, determine which of the potential sabotage plans are still viable, then get that information to the prisoner. They have 20 minutes while the quartermaster eats lunch to sneak in, get information, and sneak out, leaving the office in the same shape that they found it. In addition, they know another British agent has already been sent ahead and is missing.

During a briefing session, the players are shown a picture of the other agents, and are given a map of the Fort with several locations written up with details on how they could be sabotaged. When the players enter the office, they encounter one of their colleague agents, who is chained down. The agent explains that the guards will be walking by the office every five minutes (which is why he/she was caught), and one has just passed. The agent also explains that he/she will be transferred soon to the prison, so can carry the message of which sabotage is the one to pursue, if the players can figure that out before the quartermaster returns.

The puzzles will not be detailed here, as the Fort may use this game in the future, but all of the puzzles were built around different methods of passing secret information at the time. Since there was suspicion at the Fort, orders to the quartermaster are coming in via different channels, but all are encoded in some way. As players solve the puzzles, they learn about different authentic methods that were used to pass messages during this time, and are able to eliminate sabotages. In order to eliminate a sabotage from the list, the players will have to understand what that area of the Fort is used for and figure out how changes in procedure would then impact specific locations within the Fort.

The captured agent NPC serves as gamemaster by passing hints on to the players if they are stuck and alerting the players when the guards are coming around every five minutes (which serves as a timer for the game). An audio track with footsteps and discussion is used to provide the players the sound of the guards passing as the players are encouraged to hide to avoid detection. The agent will also ensure the players are not too destructive to the room, reminding them that everything needs to be put back in place. The players win the game if they can correctly identify which sabotage is still possible and get out of the room within 20 minutes. Win or lose, they learn more about the Fort and methods of communication during the time, and are then able to head out with their maps and see the real Fort!

## References

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Angela Ramnarine-Rieks and Alexandra Heidler for running the room at GLS, the Syracuse Game Designers' Guild for brainstorming and staffing, students at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies for playtesting, and the Fort Stanwix National Park staff.