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Cultural Bias in Remote Escape Rooms

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Abstract

Escape rooms are immersive experiences where players work together to complete challenges and accomplish goals. With the rise of COVID-19 in 2020 and subsequent lockdown of physical entertainment spaces in much of the world, many escape room facilities have started to offer remote escape room experiences where players explore the physical space through video conferencing. This paper presents the results of surveys distributed digitally to escape room enthusiasts who have played remote escape rooms with a live actor or avatar, that collected their experiences with remote escape rooms in general, and cultural bias in particular.

Introduction

Escape rooms are immersive experiences where players work together to complete challenges and accomplish goals. Brick and mortar escape rooms allow players to physically enter new environments and solve puzzles in real life, as opposed to paper-based or computer adventure games. However, with the rise of COVID-19 in 2020 and subsequent lockdown of physical entertainment spaces in much of the world, many escape room facilities have started to offer remote escape room experiences.

Remote escape rooms allow players to experience escape rooms using video conferencing technology, often with a live actor or avatar located in the physical escape room to manipulate items. Offering remote escape rooms allows physical escape rooms to reach a worldwide audience. For example, a team of players located in the United States, Australia, and Singapore can play an escape room in the United Kingdom without leaving their homes. Lisa Spira, author of the *US Escape Room Industry Report*, commented in a RECON Discord thread that according to her data, 222 US escape room facilities were running “some form of live hosted online game (avatar experience, audio-led, etc.)” as of August 2020. This number makes up about 10% of the US

escape room market (personal communication, Spira, 2020). Spira also notes that this data does not include “the many companies that have pivoted to non-hosted digital games, mobile / rental games, and other types of experience.” The Online Escape Room Enthusiasts group on Facebook was created by an escape room owner in April 2020 and as of September 2020 has over 1,600 members made up of owners promoting their remote escape rooms and enthusiasts searching for games to play (Online Escape Room Enthusiasts, n.d.).

As escape room players have an increased opportunity to play escape rooms outside their home country, it is expected that incidences of cultural bias will also increase. For some owners, hosting a remote escape may be the first time they will have foreign players who are not familiar with local norms, language, or artifacts. This paper presents the results of surveys distributed digitally to escape room enthusiasts who have played remote escape rooms with a live actor or avatar. A total of 58 surveys were submitted digitally by participants during the summer of 2020 that had played at least one remote escape room. While this convenience sample is not representative of any population, those who did respond to the survey are more passionate about escape rooms than the average person.

Demographics of Respondents

The majority of respondents were from North America, with Europe as the second most common, as seen in Table 1. This English-language bias is because the survey and the forums where we solicited participants are English-language forums. Therefore, the results of this study will be biased toward a North American viewpoint.

Continent	Number of Respondents
North America	42
Europe	12
Asia	2
Africa	1
Australia/Pacific	1

Table 1. Continent of Respondents.

As seen in Table 2, the participants have played a significant number of escape rooms, with a mean of 146 but a median of 98.

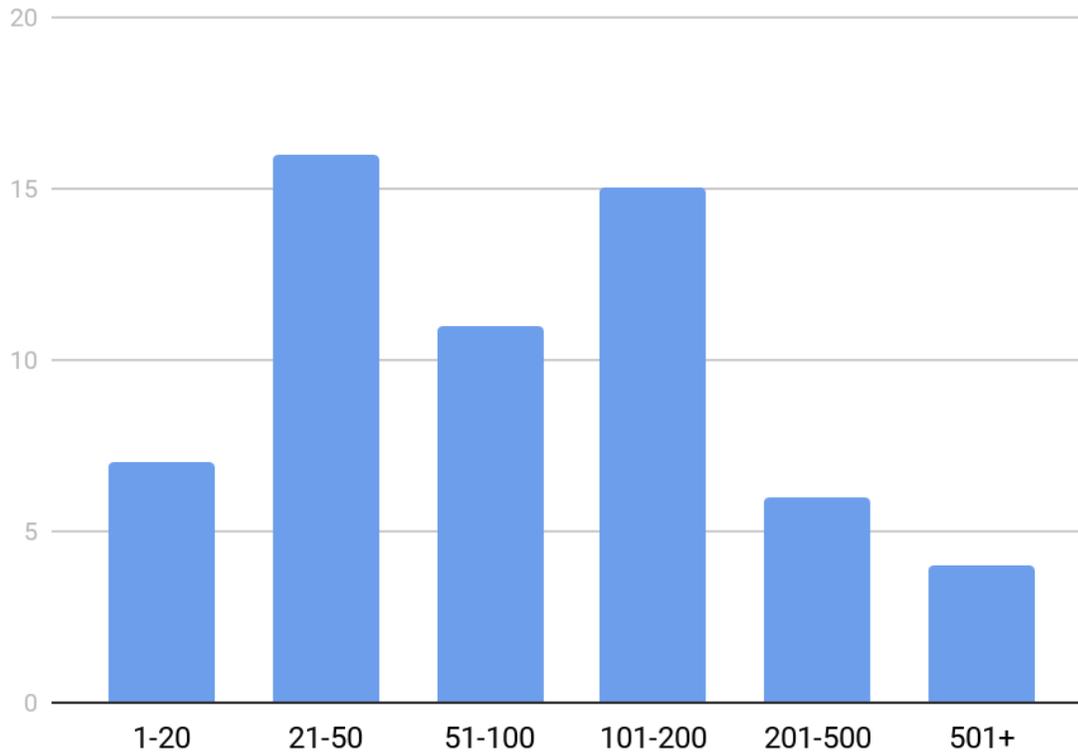


Table 2. Number of in-person escape rooms played

When comparing the number of remote rooms with the number of in-person rooms played, there is a strong correlation (.69) but with many fewer rooms, with a mean of 23 rooms and a median of 6. On average, for every 5 in-person rooms played, respondents had played 1 remote room. Table 3 shows the number of remote rooms played.

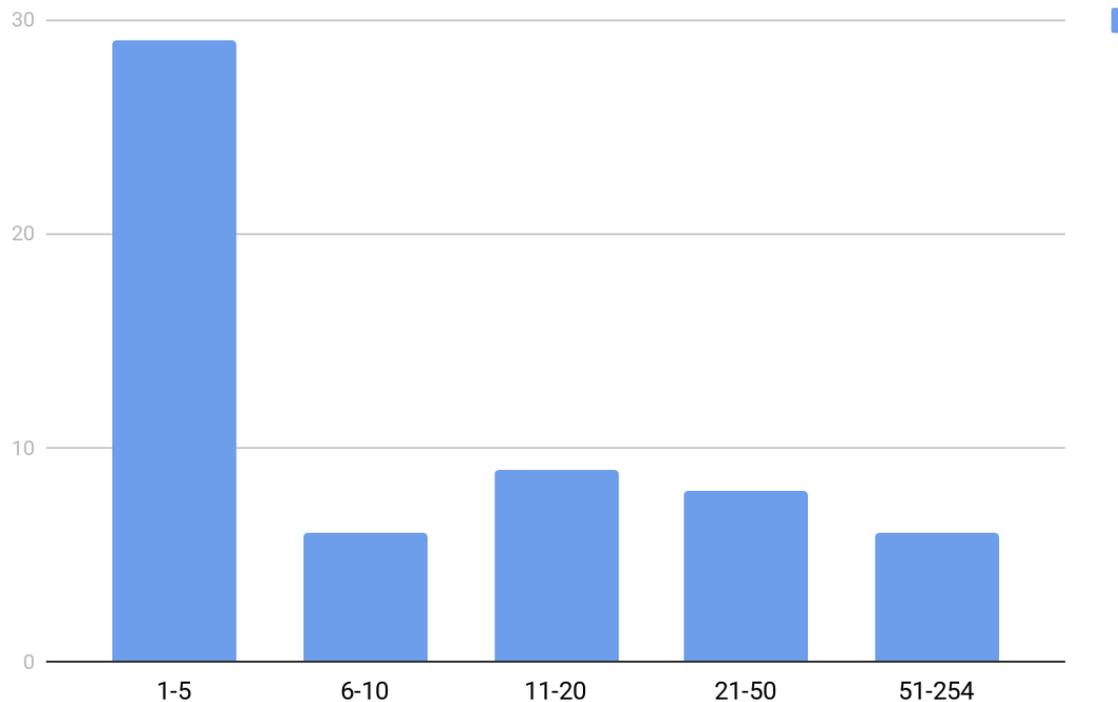


Table 3. Number of remote rooms played

One advantage of remote escape rooms is that they can allow players to play in a game outside of their home country. Most of the respondents who had played in-person rooms outside of their home country had also played remote rooms outside of their home country.

Out of the 58 respondents, 34 of them had never played an in-person game outside of their home country. However, of those 34 who had not played an in-person game outside of their home country, more than half (19) of them have played a remote escape room outside of their home country. The opportunity to play escape rooms in locations they may never visit has been a driver for escape room enthusiasts to play remote escape rooms.

Cultural bias in remote escape rooms

In our previous study, we reported the results from a series of interviews with escape room enthusiasts and finalists for the Red Bull Escape Room World Championship. Participants discussed their experiences with cultural bias or specific knowledge in escape rooms, i.e. instances when the escape room designer assumed a degree of common knowledge based on their own cultural standards (McDowell & Nicholson, under review).

Analyzing player experiences of cultural bias resulted in the conceptualization of five primary categories of experiences, based on various socio-cultural models and adapted to the specific environment of escape rooms. These categories are as follows:

- **“Language** - A system of communication used by a particular country or community
- **Symbols** - Representation of a letter, word, or concept
- **Norms** - Standards and expectations of behaviour
- **Artifacts** - Objects that constitute a society’s material culture
- **Knowledge** - Information acquired by a person through education or experience” (McDowell & Nicholson, under review).

We used these same categories to ask remote escape room players about their experiences with cultural bias and will use examples from the survey results to identify notable components of remote escape room games where players may experience cultural bias.

Language

Players who experienced cultural bias due to spoken or written language in remote escape rooms primarily reported translation issues where the game was designed in a language that players did not read or speak. All players who reported this issue, commented that in the case where audio or written clues were not translated, the avatar game master who was located in the physical space of the escape room would translate for them on the spot. If this is a common occurrence, the escape room company may want to create a set of materials in commonly requested alternative languages. This also suggests that language-based puzzles are not good for virtual escape rooms to avoid language bias.

A few players reported issues with differences in regional vocabulary, such as “spanner” vs. “wrench”, but were able to look up definitions online since internet use was not limited, or were able to ask the game host. As before, if this is a regular pattern, the company can adapt the room to use different terms for the same item.

We hypothesized that this would be the least prevalent category of cultural bias in remote escape rooms, as owners and designers would be prepared for players located in other countries to need translations. As well, players are unlikely to sign up for a game in a foreign language when it is not indicated that the game has been translated to a language they speak.

Symbols

Issues with symbols in remote escape rooms seemed to mostly occur when players needed to connect a symbol to a word, object, or concept that they were unfamiliar with. For example, one player reported playing a US-based game where they had to arrange pictures by what month they represented. As a player from the southern hemisphere and a different country, they had issues with symbols representing the seasons, as well as a pilgrim to represent Thanksgiving in November, an American-specific holiday.

One difficulty with detecting symbol-based cultural bias is when the same symbol has different meanings in different cultures. For example, clicking an X in a computer application may mean “close” in some cultures, but mean “accept” in other cultures. If the symbol is meaningless to someone, then a player will indicate that they don’t know what something means. But if the symbol has a meaning that is different, then the players may struggle based on their own assumptions and not think to ask for questions. This can lead to confusion in the communication between the players and the avatar.

Norms

In the category of norms, players reported examples from subcategories of folkways (informal standards of behaviour), mores/laws (formal behaviour codes), taboos (strongly discouraged behaviour), rituals (established procedures and ceremonies), and genres (common narratives and tropes associated with story themes). The strongest examples were of cultural specific norms that would not be familiar to players from outside that culture.

As a folkways example, in one room, players needed to know the positioning of a formal table setting, which is based upon a specific cultural folkway. In the mores and genre subcategories, players experienced a room based on investigating a legal case, which required knowledge of the laws and common legal procedures of the escape room’s home country. As a player reported: “...the legal process in the game was very different from real life here in the US.” If there are norms that players are expected to know from a specific culture, a reference or guide can be added to the room so that players can follow instructions without needing to know the specific norms.

Artifacts

Subcategories of artifacts include sensory artifacts (objects that are interpreted by a sense), tools (objects that assist a person in accomplishing a task), recreational objects

(meant for leisure or entertainment purposes), and media objects (associated with mass communication).

Notably, over 10% of participants had an example of experiencing a sensory puzzle in a remote escape room that required use of smell or touch, while several other participants reported that these types of puzzles were not possible through an online medium. In all examples of smell and touch puzzles, players had to rely on the avatar to describe what they were smelling or feeling in order to solve the puzzle, and experienced difficulties when they were not familiar with the artifact being described. As well, one player noted that with sound puzzles, even when familiar with the sound, the quality of the microphone and speakers being used can impact the enjoyment of the game.

While players reported a variety of tools and recreational objects as part of remote escape rooms, there were no reports of players having difficulties employing these artifacts in solving a puzzle. We would surmise that many difficulties in use would be smoothed over by the presence of an avatar who knows how to use the objects. For example, in an example of inserting a video game cartridge into a console system, the remote players would give the direction to the avatar who could immediately accomplish the task without figuring out the orientation of the cartridge or where to insert it.

Regarding the use of media objects, participants reported needing to navigate websites, use Google, Facebook, and phones to look up information or solve puzzles. While this is an advantage of remote rooms as players can research information and engage with the puzzles beyond directing an avatar, it can also be a disadvantage with less technologically capable groups. For example, several rooms have required players to interact with pictures on Instagram, but if no players have an Instagram account, this can be problematic.

Some games are using additional software tools to make the game more immersive for the players at home. These programs allow the players to look at game objects in a browser window, to manage their inventory system, to interact with puzzles, or to look around an environment. However, some of these programs do not work unless the player uses a specific browser or turns off their pop-up and intrusion detection programs, which creates a technical barrier for some players. In addition, this can create a security concern for the user if the escape room company is using software that is not trustworthy, as they are being asked to trust the company and turn off their layers of protection.

Knowledge

Multiple players reported instances of wordplay, riddles, trivia, and assumed knowledge in the remote escape rooms they had completed. While some players noted examples in the room to assist players, such as maps or periodic tables, others commented that they needed to search online for the answers. One player commented negatively on riddles and wordplay: “So many riddles, which are virtually impossible for a non-English speaker.”

While it is easy to create a trivia-style challenge where players are asked to search for a fact online and provide an answer, this type of challenge is not a puzzle nor is particularly engaging. There are ways to create challenges that require an a-ha moment that also require searching online; puzzle hunts use these type of challenges regularly, but these challenges can also be more difficult than typical escape room puzzles. Players paying for a live-avatar escape room experience want to be engaged with exploring the physical space where the avatar is and not taken out of the game space, searching Google for an obscure fact.

The Downsides of Remote Escape Rooms

Remote escape rooms have been a welcome source of entertainment while physical escape rooms are closed during the pandemic. However, as a relatively new form of entertainment, there are still areas for improvement. The most reported negative experiences by players in remote escape rooms can be divided into four categories:

- Technology issues
- Poor adaptation
- Poor interactions with avatar
- Unmet expectations

Technology issues include problems connecting through video conferencing, poor sound quality, and shaky cameras or blurry video. All of these issues can negatively impact a game, particularly when technology is the only method for players to interact with the avatar and game environment. Other issues, as mentioned earlier, involve requirements of players to have technical knowledge, special programs installed, specific browsers, or accounts on social media services.

Poor adaptation of an escape room refers to when the owner or designer did not consider some elements of the game that would not work over video conferencing. This includes players being unable to divy up on tasks since the avatar can only manipulate one puzzle at a time, being unable to navigate or look around within the room, and clues that while obvious while standing in a physical space, have not been adapted for

players looking through a camera. As well, small objects, small text, and hidden objects can be frustrating for players who are only interacting through video. One player described how indifferent they felt to the experience: "Watching an avatar/host do things that would have been fun to do in person, but were not appropriately adapted for the digital medium." Providing players with photographs of the rooms and props can help immensely, as it allows all players to simultaneously look for details without requiring the avatar to point the camera at a specific area of the room.

Several players described frustrating interactions with the avatar, such as an avatar that does not listen to the players, having to repeat instructions multiple times and quite detailed, and being asked "Are you sure?" multiple times before giving up. This can be helped by requiring players to establish a team leader, and asking the team leader to communicate directions to the avatar. Another route is to give the players a command word, such as "Avatar," which is to be used when the avatar is being given a direction. That will allow the actor to know what statements from players are suggestions to follow, and what to ignore.

Unmet expectations were also a concern in remote escape rooms. Two players reported booking what they thought were hosted rooms, but were not. Other players received access to a website of brain teasers or a room of solely riddles, rather than the escape rooms that they expected. In these cases, the descriptions of the games online were either misleading or not clear enough to set players' expectations for the games, leading to disappointment. Companies need to be clear in what type of experience the players will be getting.

Conclusion

With the lockdown of physical entertainment spaces, remote escape rooms emerged as a new form of entertainment. While it is unlikely that remote escape rooms will replace in-person games (only about half of respondents indicated that they were likely to continue playing remote escape rooms after the pandemic), remote games will continue to evolve alongside their physical counterparts.

Due to the accessibility of remote escape rooms to international audiences, there is a larger risk of players encountering cultural bias. However, the inclusion of a local avatar also makes it easier to smooth over any cultural misunderstandings that do occur, with the avatar able to answer players' questions and provide necessary translations. It is important for the person playing the avatar to be aware of this need and be able to

adapt to a team that does not have the cultural background to engage with a challenge successfully.

For escape room owners looking to create their own remote escape rooms, it is important to note the technological issues inherent in remote games. Ensuring that the process for connecting to the game and playing is as streamlined and easy to understand as possible will create a more enjoyable experience for players, particularly those who are not as technologically adept. Also, while some in-person escape rooms only need an avatar and a camera to play remotely, others will need to have puzzles or formats adapted to become a good remote experience.

We are now seeing the release of rooms that were designed specifically for the remote setting and are exploring concepts like time travel, avatar parkour, improved online engagement through player control of room elements, and integration of mobile phones and other technologies. Games that take advantage of existing video game tropes such as inventory lists and independent player movement will allow players more autonomy within the game. At the same time, it will be interesting to see how remote escape rooms adapt the physical and teamwork aspects of escape rooms through a virtual medium. Remote escape rooms are currently in their infancy and as they continue to develop alongside in-person escape rooms, we look forward to new innovations and challenges.

Citations

McDowell, S. and Nicholson, S. (under review). Players' Accounts of Cultural Bias in Escape Rooms.

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