Why are Escape Rooms Fun?
Using the Eight Types of Fun to Improve Escape Room Design

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"Fun" is a dirty word in my game design classes. I prohibit students from describing games as "fun" until they learn that fun is subjective, and, therefore, any statement about a game being "fun" needs to be presented in context with type of player.   As part of the [classic paper introducing the Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics](http://scottnicholson.com/pubs/funescape.pdf), Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek discuss eight different types of fun (2004).   As I was reviewing this article before assigning it to my students, I had the realization as to why escape rooms are fun for so many people – they can hit all eight types of fun!

In order to help escape room designers create games that are fun for more types of players, I am presenting each of the eight types of fun, one way that they apply to escape rooms, and how designers can improve their own escape room designs by ensuring each type of fun exists.

Discovery: Game as uncharted territory

The discovery elements of an escape room are at the heart of their design. Players typically start outside of a closed door and get quite excited in the moments of anticipation before the door opens. As they explore the space, they uncover hidden secrets, and as the game continues, they may open up additional spaces full of even more secrets. Unlike other forms of gaming, players are discouraged in sharing secrets about the game so that it can be a surprise for all. Designers can improve their fun of discovery by creating more smaller reveals throughout the experience instead of having too much delivered to the players all at once.

Narrative: Game as drama.

Escape Rooms are more than puzzles in a room; they are a story where the players can play a critical role. They are also more than theater, where the players are bystanders watching the narrative play out. If players do not feel that they are an important part of the story, this reduces the fun of Narrative. Not all players appreciate the fun of Narrative, so developing ways to allow players to choose to engage more deeply in the narrative will ensure that more players will have fun. Designers can increase the fun of Narrative by creating a story where the actions of the players are able to make informed decisions that have an impact on the story.

Submission: Game as pastime

Submission as a form of fun in games refers to giving up control to the game in order to engage with the ritual of the game. As the name implies, escape rooms are built on the concept of power exchange; the players consent to pretending they are locked within a room (even when the door is not actually locked for safety reasons). In giving up control, players then enter into a narrative where part of their goal is to reclaim the power that they gave up by escaping, gaining information, or recovering something. Designers can ensure the fun of submission is fully implemented by creating an ending to their game where the players get the experience of overcoming this submission by not only getting the final door open, but learning about the impact of what happened.

Fantasy: Game as make-believe.

Escape Rooms are about escaping reality. Players are entering a new world to have an adventure. Using puzzles that do not make sense in the make-believe world takes away from the fun of Fantasy. Players should be rewarded for putting themselves in the make-believe world by making it easier for them to overcome challenges using the logic of the game world. Giving individual players in-game abilities through specialized tools, electronic aids, specialized information can help players take on their role in the make-believe world. Designers can improve the fun of Fantasy by ensuring that each activity the players engage with are consistent with the make-believe world in which they are participating.

Sensation: Game as sense-pleasure.

As Escape Rooms are live-action games, they can engage all the player's senses. Using pen-and-paper puzzles in escape rooms reduces the fun of Sensation, as they are quite limiting in what senses they engage. Making activities physical to engage touch and using lights and sounds that convey the genre and setting and are responsive to the players are easy ways to engage more of the player's senses. Designers can improve the fun of Sensation by considering both the environment and each challenge of the game and asking what they could add to engage additional senses at each stage of the game.

Challenge: Game as obstacle course.

For puzzle-lovers, they see Escape Rooms as puzzle obstacle courses where they can work their way through each mental challenge and do things they can't do sitting at home. Many Escape Rooms also have physical challenges that allow players to do something much like they would see on a television show or in a movie as they climb through tunnels, over barricades, and crawl under lasers while performing tasks. A difficulty in designing a game for a diverse group is that different people will enjoy and will despise different types of challenges. To increase the fun of Challenge, it is important that an escape room has a wide variety of challenges, so that each player can find something they enjoy doing, but that there are allowances in the game to allow individuals to stand back and let their teammates take on a challenge that they aren't keen on tackling.

Expression: Game as self-discovery

Well-designed Escape Rooms will provide players with a variety of challenges to explore, some of which will be new to players. When a player takes on a challenge they have never done before, it can lead to a powerful sense of self-discovery. Even if a player fails the first time they attempt a challenge, providing feedback and another chance can allow them to get better until they can overcome the challenge. If the activities in the room are all things that players have done in other rooms, such as the ready-made puzzles that can be purchased online, then it reduces the chance the players will have moments of self-discovery. To improve the fun of self-discovery, it is important to develop new challenges that will allow players to try something, get feedback, learn from mistakes, and try again; that is how people improve and succeed.

Fellowship: Game as social framework

One of the reasons Escape Rooms are popular is that they are cooperative games designed to be experienced as a social activity. The group of players takes on the challenges together and are able support each other through the challenges. As a well-designed room has a variety of challenges, there are moments during the game when each player can be the hero when they succeed at the challenge. For many groups, the escape room activity is part of a larger social outing that might start with coffee before the game, then going out for a meal, drinks, or desserts after the game. Some escape rooms divide up the team for some of the game, which can have a negative impact on both the fun of Fellowship (as people are not involved with each other's successes) and the fun of Discovery (as not everyone will get to see the reveal of the unknown), so should be kept to a small portion of the room.

By looking at this taxonomy of fun and considering escape rooms, it does help answer the question – "Why are escape rooms fun?" They are fun because they have elements that fall in line with many different types of fun. An escape room owner wanting to improve their game can use this taxonomy as a checklist and think how they could improve each of these elements of fun in their game so that their game will appeal to more people.

Reference

Hunicke, R., Leblanc, M. & Zubek, R. (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. AAAI Workshop - Technical Report. 1. Available online at https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf