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Column: Innovation in Libraries

Breaking Out While Staying In: The Pandemic-Driven Rise of Virtual Escape Rooms

Katelyn E. Baroody, *Nunez Community College*

ABSTRACT

This column explores the library community's increased use of virtual escape rooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities are appealing because of their low cost, adaptability, and potential to engage patrons across demographics. The author describes her experience planning and executing a virtual escape room for undergraduate library orientation and discusses the future of library escape rooms beyond the pandemic era.

KEYWORDS

Library instruction, library programming, academic libraries, virtual environments, escape room

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The last decade has seen the rise of escape rooms into collective international consciousness, with numbers in the United States growing from roughly two dozen facilities in 2014 to over 2,000 in early 2021 (Spira, 2021). They function as an engaging team activity that combines the challenge of a brain teaser with the intrigue of a murder mystery. It should come as no surprise that educators have attempted to harness the appeal of escape rooms for use in the classroom and as entertainment. Moreover, it seems only fitting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of us were eager to escape the confinement of our own homes and social distancing restrictions, virtual escape rooms emerged as a sought-after distraction. Libraries of all kinds stepped in with creative approaches to this trend, spanning across a multitude of fandoms and information literacy topics, and built engaging tools that will hopefully be utilized long after the pandemic is over (Atkinson, 2021; Ibacache et al., 2021; Onwuemezi, 2021).

With over 2,000 escape room facilities currently operating in the United States, it's easy to see why libraries would want to join in the craze (Spira, 2021). They can be adapted to practically any topic: Stranger Things, The Avengers, fact checking, and citation styles, just to name a few. Escape rooms are appealing because anyone can learn to play, regardless of prior experience. In many virtual escape rooms, instructions note that prior knowledge of the theme is helpful, but not necessary. Perhaps most importantly to our pandemic-era needs, they are completed at a distance, safely away from others, and on any device with an internet connection. Many virtual escape rooms can be done synchronously or asynchronously, which is an added bonus for academic librarians navigating a variety of course formats. Depending on the desired platform, these games can be created at minimal or no cost. One viral virtual escape room, created by Peters Township Public Library, used an interactive Google Form to take participants on a Harry Potter-themed adventure (Ford, 2020). The escape room received more than 150,000 visits from participants around the world in just the first few weeks. Arguably just as impressive are the ways in which the creators of these escape rooms have helped fellow librarians and other professionals learn to build their own. A quick search in any Facebook group dedicated to library programming reveals dozens of posts asking questions and sharing escape room resources, in addition to the many webinars and trainings available.

Virtual escape rooms created by libraries come in several different formats. Some libraries opt for websites dedicated to creating your own escape room, such as Room Escape Maker,[1] while others get creative with tools they already have, like LibWizard,[2] LibGuides,[3] or Canva.[4] However, many library virtual escape rooms make use of apps in the Google

[1] Room Escape Maker Room Escape Maker

[2] LibWizard https://www.springshare.com/libwizard/

[3] LibGuides https://www.springshare.com/libguides/

[4] Canva https://www.canva.com/

Workspace,[5] particularly Google Forms.[6] Escape rooms in this format, such as the viral Hogwarts Digital Escape Room[7] created by the Peters Township Public Library in McMurray, PA, are linear in nature. The form contains short plot descriptions and clues, such as images, puzzles, or links to external websites. In order to proceed and ultimately escape, participants must correctly answer the questions within the form, which has built in response validation. Solving the clue correctly allows the player to move forward to the next portion of the story, but an incorrect response will prompt them to try again.

Escape room designers looking for something more freeform than the standard Google Form can opt to create a full Google Site[8] for participants to explore, using the form only as the "locks" needed to escape. As seen in the case detailed later in this column, this approach allows participants to explore the virtual space in a way that is more reminiscent of traditional escape rooms. It is not always clear what is or is not a clue, which creates an added challenge and room to embed more elaborate puzzles. No single format is necessarily superior to the others; it depends entirely on content, audience, budget, and time.

In fall of 2019 at SUNY Delhi, my previous institution, the other instruction librarians and I found ourselves looking for a new library orientation activity. Our previous offering, a scavenger hunt that utilized the library's Twitter account, was no longer effective. As student populations and trends changed, we found that with each new cohort a smaller number of students were familiar with Twitter. Explaining how to write and send a tweet took away precious class time required to meet the session's learning outcomes. I began exploring the newer trend of escape rooms, wondering if this could work in a class of up to 30 students while still keeping everyone engaged. Smaller groups would require more supplies, whether a kit from BreakoutEDU[9] or something homegrown, and certainly far more set up time. Most commercially available breakout kits are cost prohibitive at more than $100 each, and even assembling our own would amass many expenses. These challenges led me to try a virtual approach, where students could work together in small groups around one or two computers to complete the task. This format had the added benefit of working for remote learners, whose library orientations have been limited by the functionality of Zoom. No one could have anticipated what an important decision this would turn out to be as the events of the following year unfolded.

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[5] Google Workspace https://workspace.google.com/

[6] Google Forms https://docs.google.com/forms

[7] Peters Township Public Library's Hogwarts Digital Escape Room https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSflNxNM0jzbZJjUqOcXkwhGTfii4CM_CA3kCxImbY8c3AABEA/formResponse

[8] Google Sites https://sites.google.com/

[9] BreakoutEDU https://www.breakoutedu.com/

I chose to create a full Google Site for the escape room[10] after attending a webinar in which the presenter showcased a successful virtual breakout that used this format (Kroski, 2020). The sample virtual escape room site contained an embedded Google Drawing,[11] with hyperlinked areas leading to clues. The clues corresponded to a series of "locks" on a Google Form, all of which were labeled with the necessary answer format (e.g., 6 letters, all caps). To adapt this for library orientation, I created Google Drawings of our library's floor plan and linked significant areas to corresponding (hidden) pages on the site. For instance, clicking on the leisure collection leads to a page showing a sampling of fiction books and DVDs available for checkout. A Google Form with response validation serves as the locks. If a student types in the wrong answer, the error message will provide a hint. Some clues are more obvious than others. On the page about reserve materials, participants unscramble the jumbled names of reserve items to reveal the name of the school's mascot, a key to one lock. In another area of the map, they learn that an access card is needed to use a private study room and to open another virtual lock.

Online puzzles and games are easily integrated into virtual escape rooms for added fun. One area of the escape room contains an embedded puzzle created using the website Jigsaw Planet.[12] The puzzle embeds seamlessly into the Google Site, and participants drag and drop puzzle pieces to find the answer to one of the locks. We also included a library staff matching game using Match the Memory,[13] a website that allows users to upload photos to a set of virtual flashcards. Upon finding all the matches, participants see a message that will lead them to yet another answer. Including a variety of puzzles and clues keeps participants engaged, and can be accomplished even if the escape room is a standalone Google Form. However, utilizing a full Google Site adds an element of discovery and another level of critical thinking: Is what I'm looking at important or just a red herring? This makes it well-suited for an introductory library orientation. Students pay close attention and must engage with the content, assigning value to the information and learning about library services that will help them during their time at the college.

Students and staff tested the escape room over the summer in small groups using Zoom. One participant served as the "navigator," sharing their screen and clicking from room to room while the others contributed ideas and helped to solve the puzzles. This testing allowed me to get a better idea of how the activity works with remote participants and what hints they need, and it revealed some clues that required further clarification. Teams completed the five locks in around 30 minutes, which was faster than what I had anticipated would fill a 50-minute class

[10] SUNY Delhi Library Orientation Escape Room https://sites.google.com/view/resnickescaperoom/home

[11] Google Drawings https://docs.google.com/drawings/

[12] Jigsaw Planet https://www.jigsawplanet.com/

[13] Match the Memory https://matchthememory.com/

period. I added two more locks and corresponding clues before later rounds of testing, which increased the duration by about ten minutes for most groups.

To date, 76 individuals have successfully completed the virtual escape room, and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. All of the classes that used it in the Fall 2020 semester were asynchronous, so I provided them with instructions, the URL, and my email to contact if they needed hints. While I do think that the escape room is more effective as a team activity, the online nature of it allowed students to complete the assignment when it was convenient for them. One limitation of this escape room is the inability to determine how much a participant was able to complete if they did not fully escape. The Google Form has a space for the participant's name and course, but because the locks have response validation, an incomplete form cannot be submitted. For this reason, many teaching faculty have opted to offer the escape room as extra credit, and I do not set a limit on the number of hints a student can receive. Were an instructor to request a synchronous virtual library orientation, the activity would be best executed through Zoom breakout rooms with participant screen sharing, as done during the initial testing.

Escape rooms in this nonlinear format touch on many elements of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL, 2015) *Framework for Information Literacy*, but are particularly well suited to teaching the *Framework* concepts of searching as strategic exploration, research as inquiry, and the value of information. The *Framework* states that, "searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops" (ACRL, 2015, p. 22). Participants interpret the scope of the task at hand, encounter information serendipitously and through trial and error, and adjust their strategies based on what they find (or do not find). As they encounter new information they must assign it value on a couple different levels. Is it something that could open one of the locks or lead to another clue? Even if this answer is no, participants will make a secondary judgment: Will this piece of new information help me beyond the escape room as I am completing my education? To finish the escape room, students must "persist in the face of search challenges, and know when they have enough information to complete the information task" (ACRL, 2015, p. 23). While this activity does not require in-depth use of any of the library's databases, it serves as an effective introduction to library resources as well as many of the dispositions required for college level research.

My hope is that libraries will build on what they have learned during the pandemic and continue to offer engaging virtual instruction and programming. While escape rooms have been used successfully in instruction across disciplines, they are a particularly fitting tool for libraries, where we often find ourselves walking the line between academic studies and recreation. With the return to in-person learning, hopefully I will get the chance use the virtual escape room as originally intended, in the traditional classroom setting. Will the escape room orientation

eventually go the way of its predecessor, the Twitter scavenger hunt? Time will tell. As new cohorts of students pass through our doors, they will bring with them new interests and trends, many of which can surely be crafted into engaging learning experiences. For now, the emergence of librarian-built escape rooms serves as a testament to our continued relevance and ability to provide resources that nourish patrons' intellectual pursuits and well-being.

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