Calling All Escape Artists: Design strategies for digital escape rooms

Laura Gogia, MD PhD
iDesign | Senior Design Strategist
Laura.gogia@idesignedu.org
@gooleguacamole

What is an escape room?

Escape rooms are adventure games in which the players (you) work through a series of puzzles to 'unlock' the information needed to solve an urgent problem. Escape rooms were originally conceived as physical spaces meant to provide entertainment and team-building opportunities.

Educators recognized the model's potential for engaged, active learning and quickly adapted them for the classroom. Traditionally, they place assorted puzzles and locked boxes around the room and teams of students work through curriculum-related problems to unlock clues and solve a mystery. However, as digital spaces play an increasingly large role in learning, faculty and instructional designers are finding ways to create digital escape rooms.

Why design a pedagogical escape room?

When done well, pedagogical escape rooms are immersive, active, applied learning experiences that can lead to higher levels of engagement, recall, retention, and transfer. We recommend using them as orientations, first days, and syllabus reviews or for module reviews (a fresher, updated version of Jeopardy) Although not all must (or should) be included in every escape room design, some potential pedagogical components might include:

- Collaborative or team-based learning
- Case-based learning
- Authentic or situated learning
- Experiential learning
- Low-risk or formative assessment

What are some challenges to designing pedagogical escape rooms?

Great escape rooms are challenging (but fun) to design. Some things to keep in mind:

- How can I balance the "fun" elements of a digital escape room with pedagogical purpose and curricular alignment?
- How do I adapt my learning management system (or similar digital classroom platform) to support an escape room format?
- How can I make all aspects of the digital escape room accessible and consistent with universal design for learning (UDL)?
Course Site Blueprint

Using a template for a digital escape room can make it easier to design and build an effective, well-aligned escape room quickly but without stifling your creativity or individualization. Review this example of a Canvas LMS-based escape room which utilizes mastery paths to support personalized learning and ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ styling.

**Introduction**

Entrance | Front Page
Activity description and purpose

Waiting Room (optional) | Page
Activity description and purpose

Hallway | Page
Orientation information | Designed to help students acquire necessary tech skills

Signage | Page
Introduction to iconography | Designed to help students acquire necessary tech skills

Challenge Description | Page
Introduces the challenge | Provides baseline information

Links to sub-pages or downloads
Option 1 | Option 2 | Option 3

**Locations 1-4**

Location Site | Quiz
Clickable image | Quiz
Leave hints to answer in intro module or image

Clue | Activity
Activity involving curriculum-based knowledge | Leads to information required to open lock

Lock | Quiz
Based on information acquired from clue activity

Correct response
Go to Clue
Mastery Paths: Location X: Clue

Incorrect response
Dead End
Mastery Paths: Dead End (Requires use of back button)
Notes: Remediate in feedback

Correct response
Go to Location X
Mastery Paths: Location X: Site | Location X: Lock
Notes: Leave clues for next site and overall task

Incorrect response
Dead End
Mastery Paths: Dead End (Requires use of back button)
Notes: Remediate in feedback

**Final Reveal**

Final Reveal | Quiz
Clickable image | Quiz
Based on information acquired from prior locations

Correct response
Go to Answer Key
Mastery Paths: Answer Key | Exit

Incorrect response
Dead End
Mastery Paths: Dead End
(Requires use of back button)

Answer Key | Page
Connects the clues found in each location

End | Page
Concluding comments or next steps