

Chapter #18

WORKING WITH DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOMS: ADDING VALUE TO THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The escape room, also known as an escape game, is a gamification tool that aims to enhance motivation and teamwork (Wood & Reiners, 2012). In the educational field, in particular, the escape room can be defined as an action game in real time in which the players, in teams, solve a series of puzzles or problems and carry out tasks related to the curricular contents studied throughout the course, in one or more rooms, with a specific objective and at a specific time (Nicholson, 2015). The use of escape rooms for teaching-learning the English language at different educational levels has been studied qualitatively and quantitatively (Dorado Escribano, 2019; López Secanell & Ortega Torres, 2020). However, there is no study on the applicability of the escape room in the English literature classroom at the level of tertiary education. This paper aims to demonstrate how the inclusion of this innovative pedagogical tool can be useful for working on theoretical-practical contents of literary studies of the undergraduate degree in English Studies. The study will focus on exercises to implement as part of the educational digital escape room using a sample of students and evaluating their motivation.

Keywords: escape room, new technologies, English literature, higher education, digital escape room.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present research stems from the need felt by a group of lecturers of literature in English, an area of knowledge normally labelled under the general term ‘English literature’, to engage their students in the subjects of their respective courses at the university level. The teaching of literature has traditionally been at the mercy of two kinds of pressure, those that push the discipline towards the implementation of scientific methods and those that celebrate the multifarious concerns that are normally associated with the idea of reading for pleasure. It is the second aspect, the natural tendency of literature towards interdisciplinarity, that has traditionally been uppermost in the daily practice of this activity: ‘One of the reasons for this is that literature is about everything – love, sex, friendship, family relationships, ageing, death, social and historical change, religious faith, intellectual ideas, and so on. In short, it is about life in all its diversity, and this is hard to accommodate within the narrow parameters of a discipline’ (Moran, 2002, p. 21). The present study, however, starts from the assumption that it is possible to celebrate literature’s extraordinary transversality of interests and, at the same time, carefully design and implement activities for the teaching of the subject that take into account academically tested methods and scientifically oriented perspectives.

The framework of gamification was chosen because it is ‘an emerging approach and tool for teaching [that] provides the opportunity to create new, challenging, meaningful and interactive learning experiences for today’s students’ (Santamaría & Alcalde, 2019, p. 84). Our main concern, as educators, is to keep abreast professionally and, therefore, apply in our

courses recent theories related to motivation, not because of a superficial need to stay in tune with the times but because students in the 21st century demand new perspectives on education that relate to the technological world in which they live. Motivation in the literature class, just as in the foreign language class, is not an easily packed and digested concept. Lecturers of literature are aware of the multiple factors (cognitive, sociocultural, psychological, etc.) that must be considered when designing a course: ‘Motivation has long been a hot topic in educational research because of its complexity. The construct of motivation is not a single entity but a multi-factorial one’ (Wong, 2014, p. 38). This paper aims to explore one of the most successful developments of gamification, namely, the use of escape rooms in class as a motivational tool, and apply it to the teaching of English literature. A succession of challenges and a diverse assortment of activities may raise the interest of students and increase their engagement with the dynamics of the course.

2. METHODOLOGY: ORIGINS, USES, ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ESCAPE ROOMS

Thirteen years have passed since the first appearance of the word ‘gamification’ in 2008. In the second half of 2010 already, the term achieved popularity thanks to the booming expansion of games in the digital media and industry (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011, p. 9). From that moment on, the impact, success and merging of gamification with real life have been such that Jesse Schell spoke, in an interview for CNN in 2010, of an imminent ‘gameapocalypse[,] where every second of your life you’re playing a game in some way’ (Sutter & Schell, 2010). The methodological framework for our research on escape rooms is grounded on the consultation of primary critical literature on gamification and new technologies applied to teaching. Most of the studies which deal with gamification in the classroom admit that one of the main obstacles lies in finding an adequate method. In the public mind, gamification is associated with hobbies and with children’s games; establishing an academic procedure is one way to counteract the stereotype of leisure-time activity associated with this approach to learning. There is nothing wrong, of course, with providing entertaining and enjoyable exercises in class, but these should be directed towards educational aims; the main objective will be to find “inspirational, meaningful, autonomous, appealing and cognitively demanding activities that allow them to escape the boredom of traditional methodologies and awaken their interest in honing their main future tool of work: the English language” (Santamaría & Alcalde 2019, 86). The origins of escape rooms within this paradigm of gamification are somehow diffuse, although research (Gómez Sesé, 2020) places them in 2007, proximate to this crescent evolution and impact of games and by extension videogames in contemporary society. In 2007, Japanese movie and anime director Takao Kato hosted the Real Escape Game (REG) in Kyoto and, shortly afterwards, a large game named HEP Hall in Osaka. These events were soon followed by the creation of a digital magazine by Kato, Real Escape Games, where the concepts and ideas behind this gamified experience were laid bare. Since then, escape-room experiences have been known under many different names, such as ‘real-life escape room’, ‘real escape room’, ‘real escape game’, ‘room-escape game’, ‘live escape game’ or ‘real-life escape game’ (Intervirals, 2015). Escape rooms have gradually become popular leisure activities, wherein, under time constraints a group of people are locked into a room or a series of rooms and have to work collaboratively to find and solve clues hidden in order to escape. Over time and in the wake of many resounding successes in Japan as a form of entertainment, numerous rooms were opened in neighbouring Singapore in 2011. One year later, the escape-room concept became famous in San Francisco as well with the ‘Puzzle Break’ project. Meanwhile, the first escape

room in Europe was opened in Budapest by Attila Gyurkovics, the founder of the Parapark franchise (Gómez Sesé, 2020, p. 33). By 2019, there were over 7,200 escape rooms in 1,445 cities in 105 countries (Kroski, 2019, p. 3).

Therefore, the field of escape rooms is expanding because of the infinite number of possibilities that it offers, especially when included in educational curricula. Given their important presence throughout the life of a human being, games, their purposes and their possible applications and uses have been studied not only in fields such as economics, exact sciences and social and educational sciences but also by psychology, biology and, a posteriori, in the sociological and cultural fields long before their usefulness in the educational sphere was considered. In his seminal study *Homo Ludens* (2002), Johan Huizinga affirms that human culture arises and unfolds in and as play (Huizinga, 2002, p. 1), which is as important as reasoning and making (Huizinga, 2002, p. 9). Learning, then, is inherent to games; thus, game-like experiences trigger unconscious intrinsic motivation, and deep knowledge is consolidated through play, which is always attractive to people regardless of age. All this must be understood in a context in which students' motivation is one of the major quandaries for education and research, no matter the educational level under consideration, with many studies emphasising the obsolescence of the teacher-centred approach and the ineffectiveness of the overreliance on traditional forms of content delivery in class (Lee & Hammer, 2011). These studies draw a connection between intrinsic motivation and problems of level cheating, disengagement from school and, with this, higher attrition rates, while proposing gamification as a possible panacea (Cronk, 2012; Deterding, 2012; Stott & Neustaedter, 2013). During sessions, educators frequently observe their distracted students checking the time, looking at their watches or their mobile phones hopelessly and impatiently. This might be a clear sign of boredom, distraction, and an open manifestation of our pupils' strong desire to escape the class as soon as possible. Nonetheless, terms can be shifted, and students can check the time for an entirely different reason: they do not want the class to be over or want to remain until they have successfully concluded their class activity. Time limits and spatial confinement are only two of the key elements in escape-room games and, by extension, educational escape rooms that foster motivation and widen the universe of learning.

Escape rooms have evolved despite their relatively short existence and have adapted perfectly to the vicissitudes of the current pandemic, to the extent that it has become feasible to create and play in an escape room entirely online, like the one presented further in this chapter (also called a 'digital escape room'), for edutainment. What is more, the use of the information and communication technology (ICT) dimension in the elaboration of a hybrid version of this form of gamification – which might combine physical and virtual resources – helps to diversify and enrich the players' experience. Curiously and contrary to expectations, the virtual version, wherein 'an avatar in a specific setting, [interacts] with various objects to uncover clues and [uses] information from those clues to solve puzzles' (Brainy Rantz, 2017), was the precursor to the live and physical experiences now offered by escape rooms worldwide.

Escape rooms can be designed around any subject or transversal contents from diverse disciplines, such as mathematics, chemistry and history, providing dynamism to the lessons and to content that may not be very appealing to students. Educational escape rooms, therefore, are conceptualised as bridges between reality and adventure (Kato, n.d.), knitted systems in which all the elements form a complex whole. The gamified experience, then, is not a single element but a whole context with knowledge at its very centre. Nonetheless, the success of a game in the classroom depends not only on factors external to the students, such as the difficulty of the game, its regulatory system of rewards and punishments, its didactic

objectives, its duration, the props used to recreate the thematic atmosphere of the game, but also on internal factors related to the players themselves, such as their motivations, perspectives and tastes. Considering their nature, escape-room games are closed systems that engage players/students in a well-planned structure but might present unequal and uncertain outcomes when implemented in the classroom, regardless of the subject. This is why it is crucial, when planning an escape room for one of our sessions, to consider the following details that determine the success or failure of the experience, its excellence or mediocrity.

High levels of motivation and engagement throughout the experience are maintained by balancing difficulty with challenge within the game. Additionally, the importance of the theme, the narrative or story, must be highlighted. Even though escape rooms can be a combination of puzzles without a common theme and/or a narrative, according to Nicholson (2015), they 'create a moment of passion around specific topics that then can be used as the spark to then ignite interest in something for a player to learn more about later' (p. 19). Therefore, apart from engaging players more deeply by immersing them into the escape room, thematic escape rooms link challenges around the same topic, stories and narratives and immerse the players in the experience, making it more *believable* and enjoyable. Consequently, designing an escape room is not an easy process but one that requires knowledge in fields ranging from the arts and psychology to computer science. It follows basic steps established by the literature and experimentation, which stress the importance of a careful selection of the theme, the conceptualisation of the idea to be carried out in practice, the design of the mechanics of the game, the development cycle of the game and the establishment of the elements to be included, among others. In relation to all these ideas, one of the most important aspects to craft an escape-room experience in the classroom is the drawing of a connection between the game and the non-ludic or didactic objective. That is, the game must present a balance between what is known as edutainment and game and the major aim of this educational tool: the didactic side of the experience. This balance is what distinguishes escape rooms as a form of entertainment from escape rooms as a tool used in the classroom for pure and clear educational purposes.

This dynamic method based on escape-room experiences may be used either as a reinforcement activity or as an evaluation tool, during only one session, several days or even an entire school year. With this method, the student plays an active role in the learning process. Implementing escape rooms, no matter their nature, fights the boredom elicited by conventional exercises with novelty; although pressure exists, this experience is entirely different from the one created by traditional exams or class activities that might count towards the students' final marks. Here, the existence and perception of pressure are constructive as the urgency to solve the challenges helps students to focus on a scenario in which every second counts. However, students do not feel alone in facing the mission or the problem. While escape rooms promote the development of personal qualities such as persistence and resilience through extended play (McGonigal, 2011), they embed the student in a mechanism, a team that works together and pools its knowledge. Students' deductive thinking can thus unfold as they attempt to overcome challenges by calibrating and discussing decisions. Individual creativity, resourcefulness and good communication skills make the difference when solving each task collectively. Therefore, the application of this form of gamification in class foments negotiation and collaboration. Self-awareness, strategising and the use of critical capacities to make decisions or adopt a position of leadership are also fostered. These interpersonal or social abilities strengthen relationships among players, which can be beneficial for the development of lessons and other group activities in the long term as they create a positive atmosphere between peers and improve class management and dynamics. Regarding gamification in the literature class at the university level, escape rooms and, by

extension, gamification promote the assimilation of new vocabulary and grammar (Abrams & Walsh, 2014) in context since different challenges provide opportunities to practise both in different situations and with varied purposes. Oral communication is also improved as oral skills are used throughout the experience for communication and the negotiation of decisions between group members. Written comprehension and production, which are very present in the challenges (Mazur, Rzepka, & Araki, 2011; Grouling, Hedge, Schweigert, & Snider, 2014), are also strengthened. Furthermore, the review of previously grasped concepts and contents, such as historical events, literary figures and works, or sociocultural aspects in classes where literature is taught at the university level provides the educators with an amalgam of themes for their escape rooms. They can use these escape rooms to test the knowledge of their students in tandem with the aforementioned oral and written skills, thus improving the students' command of the English language as well.

The disadvantages of this innovative instrument and gamification tool are connected to the methodology of gamification in general. It is worth mentioning the great amount of time that the educator must invest to create an escape room mirroring the class's necessities, objectives and contents. However, although the process is time consuming and tedious, this drawback is mitigated by the dynamic nature of this form of edutainment. That is, escape rooms are adaptable and reusable class resources incorporating challenges that can be extrapolated to other class activities or escape-room experiences designed for groups with a different educational level.

It should also be noted that the implementation of escape-room experiences may not be entirely satisfactory, especially in the online format because of the possibility of technological problems. The escape room might also become an unmanageable activity when dealing with numerous groups and the high number of students in each university class. In this case, the lecturer may need help from other colleagues to carry out the activity. The present article, nonetheless, considers that the disadvantages of escape rooms are outweighed by the benefits offered by this valuable form of edutainment with numerous positive side effects, as the following pages will reveal.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

After assessing the applicability of escape rooms to education and the advantages and disadvantages of their use in the classroom as an educational tool – particularly in the English classroom –, an experimental session was carried out. This experience aimed to add extra value to regular English literature sessions to evaluate the improvement of students' active participation, teamwork and engagement regarding the course contents, both theoretical and practical. Moreover, the context of an English literature classroom provides an innovative approach to the pedagogical dynamics of escape rooms since there is no scientific evidence that this kind of resource has been used as an educational instrument. Since this experiment was carried out in 2020 when tertiary-education sessions were taught online due to the COVID-19 crisis, the escape-room experience was designed to be developed online by educators/facilitators and, by extension, students. This entailed great adaptability to educators' training requirements and usefulness as well as students' interests, which allowed us to explore the effectiveness of a combination of gamification and IT tools in the (virtual) English literature classroom.

The study aims at analysing, qualitatively and quantitatively, the degree of motivation before and after the implementation of the escape room compared to conventional teaching methods. The sample group for this intervention was composed of 29 undergraduate students (between 19 and 27 years old, 85.2% female and 14.8% male) taking second- or third-year

English literature courses as part of their regular academic load in a Spanish university. The sample was selected because of its accessibility to the researchers and because a considerable number of newly arrived students were not motivated. The experiment took place once at the end of the semester, with approximately three hours to solve the virtual escape room reviewing the main contents taught over 16 weeks. Spoken and written production and comprehension were part of the daily schedule and proposed activities. The first half hour of the intervention was devoted to presenting the escape room's rules and functionality and answering the students' questions.

The escape room consisted of six challenges, each only accessible after the completion of the previous one. All challenges were set in the historical context of the authors included in the syllabus of the corresponding English literature course and related to texts and genres dealt with throughout the semester. The challenges included a variety of activities such as puzzles, padlocks, audio-visual resources or the use of (simulated) social networks. Participants were pushed not only to search for answers relating to the course materials (which allowed them to properly review course contents) but also to extend their knowledge by seeking information from other sources (websites, audio-visual contents, books and articles).

Before the experiment, all participants filled out a survey comprising 24 closed-ended questions on a 1–5 scale investigating students' motivational approach to and enthusiasm for English literature lessons at the tertiary level and traditional and current teaching methodologies. They were also asked for their observations regarding cooperation and competition in learning, teamwork and working on online assignments. Finally, students were asked about their degree of interest in gamification as a tool to study English literature. Similarly, a post-intervention survey comprising 15 closed-ended questions on a 1–5 scale was designed to assess the impact of the tool on the students' acquisition and learning process, insisting upon the degree of stimulation and significance of the content of the activities, the usability of the tool after the experiment and whether the students would recommend this teaching practice for the assimilation of contents related to English literature.

The results of the pre-intervention survey show that 70.4% of the participants considered that learning English literature is useful, and 63% believed that the acquisition of the necessary knowledge is difficult. General participation in activities in the classroom was average (55.5% of the participants chose 4 or 5 out of 5), and 70.3 % claimed to work hard to acquire the required knowledge to pass the course. However, even though 37% of participants enjoyed attending English literature classes and 48.1% felt the need to learn more because they like the contents, one of the key questions related to engagement reveals that only 18.5% of the participants felt motivated in English literature lessons and only 14.8% were willing to participate actively. Additionally, 85.2% of the students admitted that their motivation depends on the professor teaching the course. Regarding gamification as a pedagogical tool, all participants (100%) believed that learning through games is useful to strengthen their knowledge related to course contents and preferred games to traditional learning styles (63%).

The post-experiment survey focuses on questions related to the virtual escape-room experience and its impact on the students' motivation when studying English literature. Most participants considered that studying English literature with escape rooms was useful (89.7%) and easier (89.6%). Additionally, the activity in the virtual classroom was very successful since 96.6% of the respondents declared that they enjoyed their active participation. The experiment seems to have impacted their attitude towards English literature classes as 89.7% of them claimed that they have a more positive attitude towards

contents and activities if escape rooms are among the teaching methods used in the classroom and considered that the professor would motivate them (93.1%) when escape rooms are included as an assessment method. Finally, the students felt that learning through such games would be beneficial for their acquisition (89.7%), and they were preferred to traditional learning styles by 96.5% of the participants. The respondents' answers seem to confirm that the escape room, as a pedagogical tool, is a particularly beneficial and motivating resource to teach English literature and have a strong impact on students' approach to content.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of our experiment are positive in terms of achieving a higher level of motivation among the students in the English literature class. The use of escape-room experiences is shown to be an appropriate method to include students in the learning process and create in them a need to know more about the topics addressed in the classroom. Educational escape rooms are gradually being established in formal education settings, where it has been observed that the experiences enhance the development of skills and competences for students, in addition to being a motivating element in their education. According to the students included in the sample, the escape room was entertaining, it helped them to review most contents, and they enjoyed having worked in teams. Participants also declared that more approaches of this type should be implemented in the teaching of literature as these demonstrate that these teaching strategies are suitable for motivating students. The experiment also showed an optimal classroom flow in which the challenge (concentration) and the game (enjoyment) are preferred. This allows the experience to be intrinsically important. This signposts that the use of escape rooms can advance in the acquisition of curriculum content. Our results reinforce previously mentioned research which found that escape rooms can be a fun and motivating teaching-learning strategy to reinforce and evaluate the curricular contents of English literature.

These positive results, however, should not distract educators and students from the fact that several constraints may impede the full success of the activity. First, online activities are prone to interruptions due to power cuts or faulty internet connections. The improper use of technological devices such as cameras or microphones may also play a part in the lack of fluidity of the teaching process. We are also aware of the fact that our sample is very limited (29 participants) and generalisations cannot be assumed. More experiments have to be carried out in order to establish a sounder connection between the use of this gamified experience and students' higher level of motivation. Additional problems are presented by the density of academic programmes and sheer lack of time during a regular working week. Creating and implementing an engaging and attention-grabbing escape room for the students also requires a considerable investment of time on the part of educators, usually taken from their personal time. All in all, however, the benefits of the use of escape rooms in the English literature class may compensate for all the difficulties met along the way. Given all benefits mentioned, this proposal implies a very powerful tool, not only for the area of English literature, but also other fields of knowledge that allow to design and implement this teaching strategy, as it promotes educators' creativity to adapt contents.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this project was supported by the teaching innovation group Storytelling and Digital Contents (20_21_2_02C), University of Almería, and CEI Patrimonio, University of Almería.

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