The Great Escape UK Unconference, London, 25th April 2016

0. Up the Game panel

0.1 What was one highlight/key message of Up the Game for you?

- Companies should work collaboratively to ensure good experiences for players across the industry, so that they come back for more.
- We're nowhere near saturation in the market yet; Amsterdam has 150 rooms just in the city (other examples as well)
- Rooms can and will get better and better in terms of technical and mechanical possibilities
- Mobile escape rooms are a big opportunity for the future
- There are a lot of people keen to drive the industry forward
- Played a game that replicated a first person shooter video game and thought it was brilliant.

0.2 What is one idea that you'll be looking to implement immediately?

- The story of your room should be scripted, just like a film. Break it down into acts to understand what the players will be doing at various times.
- The flow of a game should be carefully structured and designed; don't let players do things in a random order
- Lessons from playing the game Claustrophobia, which was very advanced
- Don't use Groupon!
- Thinking about how to make games easier or harder while they're in progress

0.3 What was one brand new idea that you'll be thinking about for the future?

- Large scale events, such as Prison Break which has hundreds of players. Use some of the ideas of escape games to provide a different kind of entertainment.
- Think about how you can accommodate 70-80 players at once in order to attract corporate clients
- How to make rooms about more than just passing or failing
- Escape games for children
- Getting a lot stronger on theming and narrative - One company has just spent £100,000 on room design which will cost £50,000 to recreate, but that is what players are starting to demand
- Basing games around existing trademarks or Intellectual Property is a possibility (though a legal grey area).

0.4 General announcements

- There's a 'UK Escape Room Owners' group on Facebook to continue and add to the conversations started today
- Hoping to have a UK Escape Room Conference in 2017

- Possibility of having a presence at UK Games Expo in 2017

1. Round 1

1.1 Cross promotion & collaboration

- So far this has only been done on a limited basis; verbally recommending other sites and having leaflets in each other's reception areas.
- Some people looking into data sharing (but need to be mindful of data protection)
- Owners/staff should play other rooms in the area so they know their styles of rooms and what to recommend to particular customers. Could this be achieved by mutual discounting?
- Package deals/group booking discounts? Could appeal to tourism market. Give rewards to those completing all escapes.
- Teaming up to get better deals with trade contacts
- EscapeGameHub is hoping to make it easier to help customers find other games that they'll like
- The personal touch of owners/staff is key in getting customers to play a second game; whether that be at the same place or elsewhere. Don't be afraid of recommending a 'competitor'.
- Sell gift vouchers/tickets to each other's sites?
- What about experience days or stag and hen dos? The traffic is uncertain and untrackable if booked by a third party. Make sure all listings are done without commission.
- Don't do Groupon!
- Don't offer too big a discount, e.g. a 50% increase in price next time could put people off

1.2 Narrative & world building

- Some people confiscate phones (and any other distractions) before letting players in the room
- Corporate teams are usually the least interested/immersed so require a special effort to get 'in the mood'
- If you're acting in character, don't break character. If customers ask 'out of world' questions, try and bring it back in world.
- The more games that people play the more difficult it becomes to impress them. But this can be done in a number of ways; it doesn't mean that a fortune must be spent on technology or set decoration.
- There are no bad game themes, only lazy implementations
- Narratives don't need to involve locked doors or escaping
- Set decoration is important in getting the immersion right. Be realistic; don't have bare white walls and ask people to believe they're on a spaceship or in a submarine
- If hints can be delivered in theme it's great. Include the communication mechanism in your room design

- If the GC/host can be in character (before and/or during the game) it's another level of immersion
- If there's a hint that you always have to give think about if the puzzle needs to be reworked and/or if you can build a hint into the room. Try to avoid 'scripted hints' which proves that people always get stuck there.

1.3 High level game design

I think the attendee from Breakout Inverness/Aberdeen took notes for this one.

- Ideal room size: long discussion, but in summary you should genuinely believe in the size you offer. People will ask to bring more people along, and you need to decide whether the risk of bad reviews/lack of enjoyment outweighs the risk they'll do something else.

1.4 Staff planning and recruitment

A small discussion started on this topic, later than the others and upstairs. It has not yet been confirmed whether or not there was a scribe for this session.

2. Round 2

2.1 Corporate sales/scales

- Don't be limited by your booking system
- Provide food
- Sell an 'experience' not just an escape game
- Be prepared to close rest of rooms even if not full; sell a dedicated day to them
- Offer a 'corporate debrief'. Don't just expect to do the 'normal' hosting.
- Remember team bonding and team building are separate things; be clear what you're offering
- Make a day of it; provide something else for people to do when they're not playing a room

2.2 Making escape games 'a show'

We had surprisingly little to say on this (possibly because the topic had been misannounced)

- Surprise is key. Good reveals
- Replace hosts with actors
- Tell a story - it converts the challenge into an experience/performance

2.3 Technology in escape games

TBC

2.4 Start ups and councils

- Remember you don't necessarily need premises; mobile and outdoor games can work
- It's very difficult to understand zoning and to work with local councils (who are busy and not necessarily interested people)
- There's a belief that as a 'pop up shop' you have a two year 'grace period' in order to get the zoning right. Some people are prepared to just open and hope it gets sorted later. Others are being more cautious and finding it very difficult to get started.
- Would there be a way, and a benefit, of establishing some sort of Escape Rooms Association that can work with councils to try and make this easier (and possibly other things)?
- There's more than one business model when opening an escape room, e.g. town centre location with more footfall but higher rent and less space vs. out of town with more space and freedom. Think about what you want to do first and find premises to suit. There's no right and wrong.

Round 3

3.1 Marketing

TBC

3.2 How to make losing fun

- The prevailing theory at the moment is that escape rates should be 20-50% so if people get out they feel like it's an achievement, and if you fail you don't feel too bad.
- A counter argument is that escape rates should be 95% (some people don't want to be helped) but the room should change to allow for both inexperienced and experienced (aka bad and good) players.
- One way of doing this is having hard and easy modes of rooms, either by restricting hints or by physically changing the room in advance. The customer decides what they want.
- Another way of doing this is 'simplifications and complications'. Things that are the GC's control which can make the game easier or harder whilst in progress.
- The GC should be making an assessment of the team during their introduction and deciding what the team wants; is escaping important to them? Do they want hints?
- But is this practical and is it necessary? Are there enough players for whom this would make a difference? How much of a difference is it making?
- 'Value for money' is probably key. Paying for 60 minutes and getting 30 minutes disappoints players.

3.3 Using live actors in rooms

- Games using them included the Hide & Shriek scare experience, Time Run, Enigma Quests and two of the Sherlocked Rooms in Amsterdam.

- It was noted that actors were used in a game called The Vault, drawing on the actors' role-playing and improvisation experience.
- One game in Moscow features a casino game which was rigged so that the team would be sure to win it. You would play against a drunk dealer, who periodically "passed out"; while the dealer was awake, at least half the team had to play the game so to distract the dealer, though activity was unrestricted while the dealer was "passed out".
- Live actors don't have to be zombies or hosts.
- People may find dealing with actors uncomfortable; their use may be most appropriate when this sense of discomfort is felt to be a virtue in context.
- Does this forced audience participation help inspire immersion? At the very least, it creates a leader within the team - whoever steps forward to perform the interaction.
- People may say they want to interact with actors, and yet not actually want to interact them in practice, preferring to interact with their friends.
- It is crucial that the interactions between players and actors make sense in context.
- Wages varied from operator to operator, though all operators found scheduling breaks and providing good working conditions for dressed actors challenging.
- The extra expenses arising from incorporating live actors mean that they may be better suited to games with larger teams so that the extra salaries may be spread among more players.

3.4 Escape games (purely) for kids

- Players have very variable difficulty - probably most games are playable by 12+, so interesting range is the ones that are younger than that
- Only one example we knew about in the UK - a game in Glasgow targeted at parties.
- Lots of searching - kids are good at it, and love it
- "Process" puzzles can be fun for kids - they know what to do, and they just churn away at it. Adults usually find that dull, but children seem happier
- Can have "disgusting" stuff - like putting your hand into a bowl of gunge to find things. Kids don't mind getting dirty as much!

We then digressed on to what you'd do if you wanted to make a game targeted at people who want to get drunk. I have no idea how.

- Very, very, very robust set required!
- Could make it so that each puzzle requires you to down a shot
- Wipe clean surfaces.
- And it went on, but I don't think you want to hear about the details...

Round 4

4.1 Health & safety and legal issues

- Needs to be considered both before and after you open
- When selecting a property think about fire safety etc. Have relevant assessment carried out by professionals

- Building use should be changed to D2 (most commonly used for escape games)
- Try to make contact with an individual planning consultant and work with them to complete the process
- Don't spend a fortune on H&S. Lots of self assessment guidance available online which is sufficient for initial start up.

4.2 Expanding, moving, closing etc.

- If you were buying an existing room what would you want? All the contents? Just the designs? Staff?
- Where can you get investment from? An existing company? Chamber of Commerce loans?
- Before opening think about marketing:
    - Groupon is good for marketing but not for brand value
    - Can you be quirky and memorable?
    - Can you link with any local universities?
    - Have a clear strategy
    - Make it trackable so you can measure what works
- Think about location. How are people going to get there? Are you competing with others nearby? Is the area going to put some people off?

4.3 High tech vs no tech

- 'Technology' can mean different things. Hidden wires and sensors can replace padlocks and make rooms feel more 'magical'/immersive. Using a tablet or other electronic device during a game is something different; can be good, but can also start making it feel like a computer game.
- Technology can become out of date; good puzzles should always be rewarding
- Using technology could create an 'arms race' at the expense of other aspects of room design
- Using technology in a room puts an extra burden on replacements and staff's ability to repair quickly; Broken technology is a lot harder to fix than swapping a padlock. Broken technology also stands out a lot more, particularly if that's the main focus of the room.
- Lots of information on youtube and other channels for introductions to ideas like arduino and proximity switches

4.4 Game themes

TBC