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Escape Room with a touch of chamber LARP as a creative form of library promotion – a case study

*(Escape Room na zasadach chamber LARP jako kreatywna forma promocji biblioteki
– studium przypadku)*

Słowa kluczowe: Escape Room, LARP, gra terenowa, promocja biblioteki, marketing, grywalizacja

Abstrakt: Z okazji 100-lecia Biblioteki Głównej AGH, w ramach dni otwartych, zorganizowano wiele atrakcji mających przyciągnąć uwagę społeczności akademickiej. Jedną z nich była gra terenowa w konwencji Escape Room przygotowana jako chamber LARP, aby w niecodzienny sposób, zgodnie z zasadami grywalizacji, przypomnieć i pokazać, jak potrzebnym i ważnym miejscem jest Biblioteka.

Keywords: Escape Room, LARP, promotion of library, marketing, gamification

Abstract: On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the AGH-UST Main Library, a number of activities were organized as a part of the open days to attract the attention of the academic community. One of the main events was an Escape Room game organized as a chamber LARP to remind and show in an unusual way, according to the principles of gamification, how necessary and important the Library is.

The year 2022 marked the 100th anniversary of the Main Library of the AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków. The University itself began its activities in 1919, two years later the Senate Library Committee responsible for the organisation and development of the library was established, and in January 1922 the first qualified librarian was employed [5]. To celebrate the centenary jubilee, the AGH-UST Main Library organised many events including: a scientific conference, open days, a run, a family picnic, various competitions, meetings with authors, lectures, training courses, workshops, exhibitions, games, chess tournaments and promotional activities. A website for the anniversary celebrations has been prepared, where one can learn about the history of the Library, follow the planned events and read reports on the events that have already taken place [1].

One of the challenges was to organise the two-week-long Open Days, which took place from 9 to 20 May 2022. The event was aimed primarily towards the AGH academic community, and one of the objectives was to offer the widest possible variety of attractions for each group, be it students, doctoral students or University employees. The Open Days began with a meeting with the author Professor Andrzej Dragan, followed by the official opening of the jubilee exhibition „Not only books... A Library Different Than You Think”, and Library users were invited to participate in a variety of workshops – from those supporting research careers at the University, enhancing academic achievements, using bibliometric indices, selecting journals for publication or adapting materials to the needs of people with disabilities, to workshops on first aid. The organisers invited readers to explore the nooks and crannies of the Library that are not usually accessible. On this occasion, the most valuable collections and unobvious library equipment were presented, as well as anecdotes related to the scientists’ work and publications. The organisers also wanted to offer attractions aimed primarily at students – events that would encourage them to visit the Library and break the stereotype of the academic library as a place used only for study. Hence the choice to organise events as games. The first was a chess tournament arranged in cooperation with the Gens Una Sumus Foundation – Two Towers Chess Club. The second was an original escape room game.

The escape room concept emerged in 2003 at the GenCon Indy convention [11] in Indianapolis, USA. The game draws directly from previously known games and attractions in the style of haunted houses, scavenger hunts or ‘escape the room’ computer adventure games, in which the player’s task is to solve a puzzle in order to change locations and ultimately exit or complete the game. This is a cultural and entertainment attraction based on sensations and emotions transferred from games to real surroundings. An additional aspect of solving brain puzzles and physical activities in a group is learning team building and cooperation skills [8], valuable not only in the library and university. Benefits for the library, in organising this type of activity, stem directly from the idea of gamification. It involves using game elements in a non-game context to engage and motivate action, learning and problem solving while achieving desired behaviours or other stated goals [3], which in this case would be to improve library image and proficiency in using the tools provided by the library.

The concept of this type of game organised in a library is not new, although public and school libraries are the most common organisers. The vast majority of games are aimed at children and teenagers. There are websites describing similar events [12], as well as sites providing a database of materials and ideas for organising an escape room [2]. Most often, such events accompany Night at the Library events or are a different form of library lessons, aimed towards teaching and encouraging users to use the library in an interesting way. At universities, the situation is somewhat different. The escape room serves as a presentation of the university or library and is often organised on the occasion of open days [6], or as a form of promoting university history and tradition.

Most games of this type take place in traditional form. They are organised in such a way that participants voluntarily allow themselves to be locked in a pre-prepared location, and the goal of the game is to find the key or exit. Another form is online gameplay, i.e.

using the Zoom platform, but this is a practice rarely used by institutions [8]. Most often such games are conventional games that promote integration on dedicated multimedia platforms.

The organisers of the escape room at the AGH-UST Main Library in Kraków wanted the educational layer of the game to manifest itself in the ability to use the library catalogue and navigate through its resources. The chosen location for the game was the Journals Storage Room. The attractiveness of the location was based on the fact that it is inaccessible to readers, and on the fact that it is large enough to feel the atmosphere of a century-old institution, see the vastness of the collection, learn about the work of a librarian, and even get lost among the shelves for a while.

„You want to return a book, but it turns out to be damaged – it’s missing pages. In order not to pay a fee for destroying it (after all, it’s better to spend it on ... more pleasant things), you take the one in a hundred years opportunity to redeem yourself. If you manage to reverse what you have done before the sun goes down, you will not suffer the consequences. To do this you must assemble a team and take part in the challenge of the Oldest Librarian who still remembers the last plague. Your task will be to go down to the storage room with the damaged book, find the missing pages and convince the keeper of the collection to restore the book to its lost glory. Then all that is left for you to do is to happily get out of the storeroom and return the book before the sun goes down. Make sure you have a clever technician-magician, a brave warrior and an eloquent bard on your team. Only together will you have the chance to explore the Library’s mysterious underworld and have a great adventure. Provided you manage to get out...” – This was the description that encouraged all those interested in taking part in the escape room game *The Book of Exit* and introduced them to the convention of the game.

At the development stage of the game’s plot and puzzles, the organisers faced two basic issues that forced them to change the original concept and expand it with additional elements outside the typical escape room formula. The first issue was the scenario itself – the organisers wanted it to be attractive and innovative. The second was safety issues – both for the participants in the game and for the collections. It was obvious that the participants could not be locked alone in the store room, and the presence of the librarian could not consist only of keeping an eye on the players.

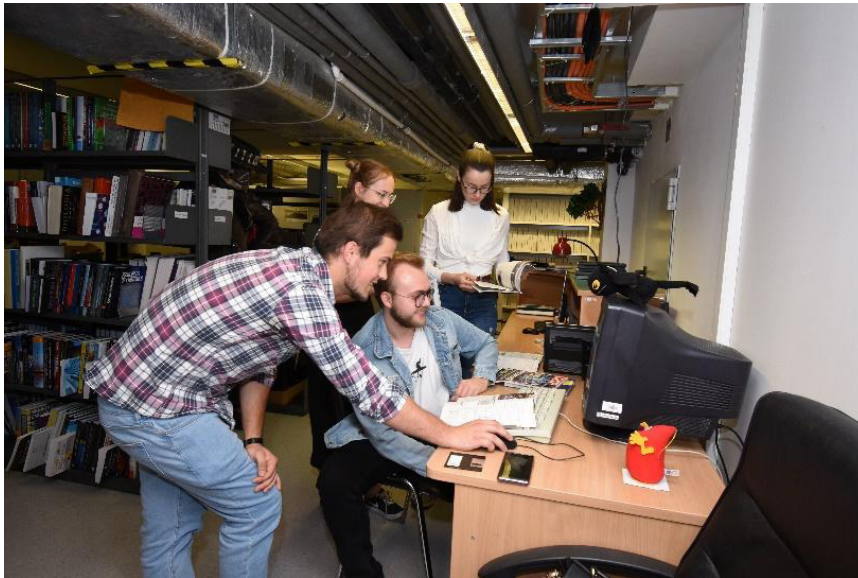
The first distinguishing quality of the organised game was the storyline. It was not intended to directly promote the University or the Library as an institution. The game was designed to celebrate the Library’s centenary – so, to emphasise the anniversary character, the theme of the 100-year-old librarian and the once-in-a-hundred-year opportunity to enter the storage room was used. However, the scenario focuses primarily on the players themselves, their task and the characters they meet, and the detailed course depends on the participants and their interaction, both with each other and with the moderators.

In order to make the game more attractive, but also to ensure the safety of the participants and the library collection and to allow exploration of a large, usually inaccessible space, it was decided to hybridise a classic escape room with a chamber LARP.

A Chamber LARP is a game taking place in an enclosed space, usually for a small number of players, with characters prepared entirely by the authors of the game according to an artistic vision and usually with minimal or symbolic scenery [4]. According to this definition, unlike other LARPs, here the main criterion is space. In contrast, the LARP itself is a type of role-playing game in which participants physically act out scenarios, usually using costumes and props [7].

At the Main Library of AGH-UST, before the game started, participants were given a copy of a book withdrawn from the collection with missing pages, with the task of returning it at the circulation desk. There, a librarian who did not want to accept the damaged copy offered an alternative – finding the lost pages. He would lead the group to the Storage Room, where a person was waiting to guide the players through the rest of the game. The character was a costumed librarian, in the role of the oldest, centenarian employee, a role he continued until the end of the game. There were three other librarians in the storage room in costume and with pre-prepared roles, whose job was to moderate and guide the players through additional tasks. The aim of the game in itself was not to leave the locked room, but to find the missing pages, fix the book and leave the room to return the complete book to the circulation desk – only then did the game end.

Image 1. AGH students taking part in the game during the Night of the Libraries on 8 October 2022



Source: photo by Paweł Nowaczyk.

This setting helped to make the game more interesting, as the librarians interacted with each other in front of the participants. Depending on their role, they helped or distracted the players and ad-hoc moderated the atmosphere of the event. In the LARP convention, roleplaying librarians became ‘classic’ NPCs (Non-Player Characters) – independent

characters whose role is to assist the ‘regular’ players, pilot the plot and bring to life the world designed by the creators [10]. This helped to ensure that the game was fun, making sure that health and safety rules and regulations for the storage and preservation of the collections were adhered to. It provided reassurance about the security of the collections, while ensuring that players interacted with the environment in a way that would not have been possible if the players had been left alone.

From the beginning of the game, the participants also had to play their roles. After being introduced to the storage room, the players had to explain how they got there and why they had a damaged book. As part of the help offered, they were given a 3.5” FDD floppy disk with a clue on the label and information on which computer they could be using it. The first task was to find an external drive with which to read the contents of the floppy disk. From there, a series of clues led to missing pages, tools to fix the book and something to bribe one of the librarians with to help with repairs. The final hints were about getting out of the storage room. The use of the floppy disk as a prop proved particularly appealing to the players, as for the current students it is a technology they no longer have the opportunity to use. In order to read the clues on it, they first had to learn how to use the floppy disk drive.

Image 2. AGH doctoral students taking part in the game during the Night of the Libraries on 8 October 2022



Source: photo by Paweł Nowaczyk.

The organisers scheduled a maximum of 1.5 hours per game. Participants usually took between 45 minutes to just over an hour. The speed of solving puzzles or completing further tasks was also influenced by the level of interaction between players and NPCs. The game, initially planned for one day only, was so popular that it was repeated twice more. During

the Open Days, students took part in the game, and in later editions (during the Family Picnic and the Night of the Libraries), PhD students and teaching staff also signed up with their whole families. Groups were by design 4-person groups, although during one edition, in between the entries of registered participants, a group of 7 students came forward who were very keen to take part in the fun. The moderation, the presence of NPCs and the way the game was prepared fully allowed the ad-hoc game to be run for more players.

When preparing a game of this type, it is extremely important to think carefully about the scenario and to test the game beforehand. It is necessary to make sure that the puzzles prepared are, on one hand, difficult enough so that solving them will require a moment's reflection, cooperation of the players or several attempts and, on the other hand, solvable, directing toward the next hint and giving satisfaction from finding the answer. It is worth testing whether the players are able to fit in the time limit. Additional tasks can also be prepared to be added freely during the game. This allows the game to be moderated on the fly during the game and influences the pace of the game depending on how a particular group of players manage to solve successive tasks.

When preparing NPCs, it is a good idea to outline only the general framework, character and role of the character and to establish only those details that are necessary for the game to run properly. Leaving the freedom to create a character to the staff member who plays it makes it easier to run the game and to add changes depending on the group of players. It is possible to adapt individual elements depending on the age of the players or how well they are doing with the challenges to be solved. This allows individual characters to interact more easily both with each other and with the players, allowing for improvisation. It is also a great convenience when successive editions of the game are implemented at different times, which can affect the availability of staff playing various roles. In the experience of the organisers, changing characters, while retaining only the details required by the game scenario, does not disrupt the gameplay. On the contrary, it allows to add variety to the game, add new elements and generates ideas to be used in the creation of further scenarios. If the game becomes sufficiently popular, the organisers even encourage the substitution of actors. This will also introduce variety to the game for the hosts themselves, who will not fall into a routine and for whom running the next game will be as fresh and exciting as for new players. This will help to maintain the high quality of the event.

It should also be taken into account that players will not always follow the prepared scenario. It may be that they will solve the puzzles in a different order to that planned by the organisers. It is advisable to be prepared for this eventuality by planning the game in such a way that the scenario is as flexible as possible. In the experience of the organisers, different groups of players get involved in the game in different ways. Some groups cooperate at every stage, others split up to complete tasks more quickly or to check out several locations at the same time. It also happens that players become so involved in the game's storyline that they start playing not only as a team, but also among themselves – e.g. wanting to complete the game on their own, thus leaving their companions in the storage room.

Image 3. Characters prepared by librarians, in the background participants in the game during the Night of the Libraries on 8 October 2022



Source: photo by Paweł Nowaczyk.

Image 4. AGH students taking part in the game during the Night of the Libraries on 8 October 2022



Source: photo by Paweł Nowaczyk.

When organising this type of game in the library, there are several important issues to consider. Apart from coming up with the plot itself and the accompanying puzzles, there remain a number of formal and organisational issues. The first of these is registering participants and obtaining the necessary consents. It is advisable to organise early registration for individual game dates, e.g. by publishing information on the website and keeping the information about available dates up to date. When confirming their registration, you

can immediately send participants the content of their consents for participation in the game to be filled in and signed. Such a document should include consent to the processing of personal data and to the free recording and public distribution of their image. This way, the organisers will be able to take photos or videos and use them in their own materials – e.g. to promote library activities or future editions of the game. In the case of minors, the declaration is signed by a parent or legal guardian.

The second important issue is the promotion of the event. In addition to the standard posters, flyers and information posted on the homepage or social media, for example, it is worth preparing dedicated graphics or videos. The organisers made a video promoting the game and designed posters consistent with it, which were hung not only in the Library itself, but also at the University [9]. They also attempted to secure sponsors of prizes for the participants. To stay on the theme of games, the choice was between manufacturers and board game shops. When looking for partners, it is best to choose local companies – it is important to remember that such cooperation must be profitable for both parties. When preparing an enquiry, it is worth considering whether our users are a target group for a particular company and what the library can offer in return. The organisers have established cooperation with a Kraków-based shop, Huta Gier, for which students, especially those interested in participating in the game, are a target group. In addition, the Library offered promotion by placing information and logos on its homepage, anniversary page, social media, on any printed materials (posters, flyers, etc.), and the possibility of putting up flyers or posters in the Library. In addition to board games donated by the sponsor, all participants received commemorative diplomas containing the shop's logo. It is advisable to prepare a barter agreement which covers all the arrangements and how and when the service will be provided. In the case of the organisers, the cooperation undertaken proved so fruitful and rewarding for both parties that it was continued in subsequent editions. Huta Gier is a company created by true enthusiasts who, in addition to their shop, also run a rental shop. During the Night of the Libraries, they organised an evening of board games at the Main Library of AGH-UST – not only renting games, but also talking about them, giving advice and introducing participants to the rules of individual titles. Interested participants could also purchase games, books and accessories. In this case, the benefits were also mutual, and the event was promoted by both the Library and the shop. The Night of the Libraries, both in terms of organisation and the number of participants, was satisfying for both parties, hence the idea to continue joint events in the future. When attracting sponsors, it is important to ensure mutual benefit, which can result in long-term cooperation.

There are still groups left who signed up to play but were unable to do so due to time constraints. The game will continue, also in new versions, with a changed scenario and other characters in the form of NPCs. The combination of escape room and chamber LARP can be considered very successful, offering a lot of adaptability, freedom and flexibility with regard to the player. Changes can also be made during the gameplay if necessary. In addition, the organisers were met with enthusiastic reactions from the participants, including acknowledgements containing statements such as: „we have never been in such an escape room, or rather a whole arranged performance, with fantastic roles of the actors involved, wonderful costumes”.

Image 5. Poster promoting the game during the Night of the Libraries

nocne iGRASZki w bibliotece
7-8.10 noc bibliotek w BG AGH



7 października (piątek)
18.30 turniej szachowy

8 października (sobota)
16.00 "O co chodzi w LARPach i grach terenowych" - pokaz
18.00, 20.00, 22.00 escape room "Księga Wyjścia"
18.00 planszówki z Hutą Gier

 BG AGH |  100LAT! |  HUTA GIER 

Source: own design.

Undertaking such activities not only gives satisfaction to both the organisers and participants, but also breaks the stereotype of the library as a place used only for study and work. It improves the image of both librarians and institutions. It allows relationships to be forged, including business relationships – by gaining partners for joint activities. Within the academic community, it promotes the library as a place worth visiting because it can surprise and entertain. It encourages people to keep an eye on the website and social media for new and interesting events.

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