**Media Theory - Escape Room VR**

The argument has long been made (since 2003) for Virtual Reality to be considered “a particular narrative medium alongside Theatre, Literature or Cinema” (1), and as the quality and realism of the immersive experience has increased so much, as the medium has developed in recent years, any counter argument has surely all but vanished. Virtual Reality is now considered and regarded as a media technology (2).

As such it was worthwhile considering the media theory underpinning some of the concepts in the VR Escape Room as it was being developed.

The whole concept of a VR escape room came from considering the general **Agenda Setting Theory** of the mass media. I.e., identify an area of concern to the general public and then give some attention to it. Lockdown and the vaccine are on everyone’s mind at the moment and so this connection to the escape room could be of interest. Although there has been a limited amount of study on Escape Rooms in general, they have been identified as a game-based learning process (3).

The **Uses and Gratifications Theory** suggests that individuals will actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs - assuming as it does that the “audience members” are not just passive consumers. The Escape Room allows the player to do something, with a final result and to get out at the end. They can satisfy a need by escaping from the escape room, even if they are still stuck at home when they take their headset off. To make the environment as immersive as possible was therefore highly desirable, so the decision was made very early on to go for realistic graphics, as opposed to stylised ones, and to include as much VR “activity” as possible. Smooth locomotion. Functional drawers and cupboards. Objects to pick up and do things with. Make it an active environment, not just a passive one.

Considering **Symbolic Interactionism**, the escape room app makes quite extensive use of semiotics as the player uses both explicit and implicit signs in the room to interpret and interact with the environment. For example:

* The monitor on which the videos are shown has a high level of affordance (especially in this Zoom age) and is looked at initially as an icon for communication. The player is rewarded with considerable guidance through this medium.
* The red and green lights on the keypad on the wall by the door, act as an index for the player’s success with the tasks. An indicator of progress.
* The whole escape room is symbolic of being locked down (in) and of the lockdown itself.
* The plank in the outdoor environment acts as an icon for the right direction. A map – a clear route ahead.
* The Bunsen burner and the microscope are strong signifiers of affordance and are symbols of their use.
* Etc.

To ensure the puzzles and tasks make sense and send the right messages to the player was at the forefront of their development. It was in fact the driver of several changes to the environment, the puzzles, the assets, the videos and the underlying logic in the scripting. Although the tasks and flow of the application were discussed extensively in meetings beforehand, at times the needs of the user experience only became evident during development, leading to alteration. Even with something as “simple” as the keypad that allows the player to input the results of the tasks, the colouring of the numerical buttons as they were pressed was a late introduction as some issues with fine control were identified and a new video was made to reinforce that an incorrect number had been entered.

1. Louchart S, Aylett R. Towards a Narrative Theory of Virtual Reality [Internet] ResearchGate. 2003 [cited 4 January 2021]. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220530284_Towards_a_Narrative_Theory_of_Virtual_Reality>
2. Kruzan KP, Won AS. Embodied well-being through two media technologies: Virtual reality and social media [Internet] New Media & Society. 2019 [cited 4 January 2021]. Available from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444819829873>
3. Järveläinen J, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki E. Escape Room as Game-Based Learning Process: Causation - Effectuation Perspective [Internet] Proceedings of the 52nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. 2019 [cited 4January 2021]. Available from:  
   <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/211327239.pdf>