

InterGame

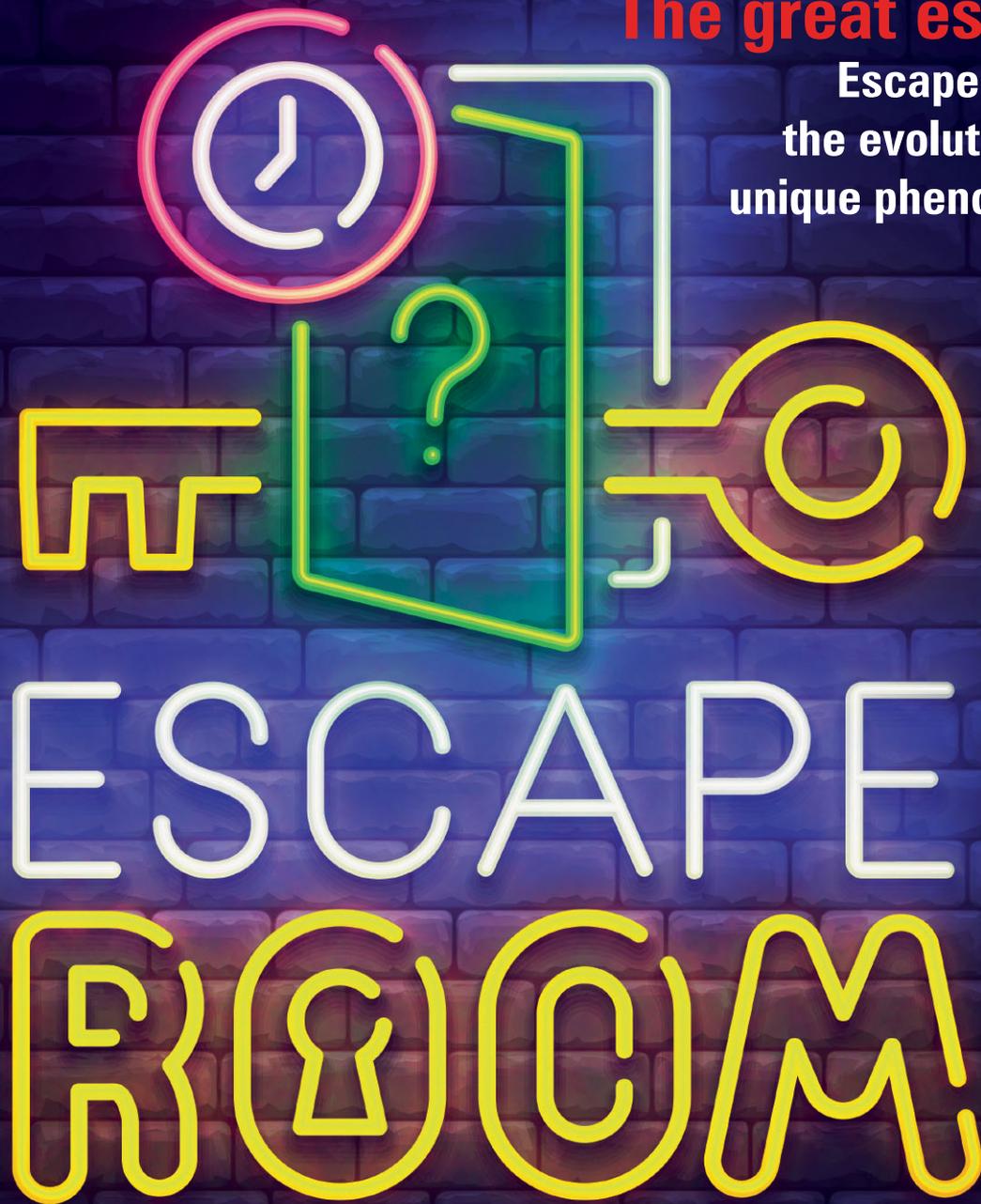
THE OPERATORS' NUMBER ONE CHOICE

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The great escape

Escape rooms:
the evolution of a
unique phenomenon



Taking centre stage

The latest and greatest
anchor attractions

It's in the cards

The continued rise of
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Work the room

Escape rooms exploded onto the scene a few short years ago and have evolved rapidly during that time. *Ian Donegan* explores its latest incarnations

FEW things make us feel cleverer than cracking a puzzle. Anything from crosswords to Rubik's Cubes, they are the thinking person's entertainment.

Escape rooms have taken everything about this experience and turned it up to 11. Arriving onto the scene about six years ago, the idea was for players to find their way out of a room before the time ran out. They were tasked with finding clues that helped locate keys to a box with a code inside that would reveal a door and so on until the customers found their way out.

A breath of fresh air when they first arrived, the game's ability to capture people's imaginations naturally piqued the amusement industry's interest. However, the format has now morphed and is available in some very different capacities. As investment grew, more companies began experimenting with more technologically enabled offerings. As well as that, the format has moved on from just being an exercise in getting out of a room and has centred around any number of themes and challenges that players have to complete before the time runs out.

Lucardo, a business with five escape rooms in Manchester, UK, features a wizarding school-themed offering, University of Magic, which asks its contestants to brew a potion to pass an exam before they can enrol in the school.

This site gained some notoriety in 2017 when it opened this room. While the business went to no lengths to market this as a Harry Potter-themed room, the media referred to it as such, creating the kind of Potter-mania that sells out everything it touches. Sure enough, the room was booked out solid for months in advance and all without having to pay for any pesky licences.

The site has a sixth room planned, Operation Santa, which will be released during the festive season.

The lifeblood of a good escape room experience is its game master, who oversees the session. Every site talks about the importance of well-trained reliable staff, but game masters need to be a combination of charming, friendly and intuitive with a little acting talent and some serious multitasking skills.

To get an idea of the kind of challenges they face, this reporter spent an evening with two of the game masters of Lucero - Conor MacKessy and Mike Davenport.



Crave Golf's Zombie Research Lab



Crave Golf's Mayday

It was a particularly busy evening for the pair, operating three rooms at any one time between them. This involves greeting the guests for each room as they arrive, setting the scene for them, informing them about the challenge and giving a safety briefing (which includes assuring them that at no point are they actually locked into the room), monitoring them while they are in the room, giving clues where needed, opening various doors and cabinets remotely when the players have reached certain checkpoints and debriefing them afterwards - congratulating them on their time or commiserating with them for not making it on quickly enough. Either way, the players get a photo, which goes on to the site's Facebook page, adding additional promotion for the site. As well as all this, certain rooms require some interaction during the game. One involves a murderer's apartment where one of the two men must pose as the murderer returning to the apartment while the players hide from him, which the game masters have to factor into all their other time-sensitive tasks.

Davenport, an energetic people person, took care of most of the meeting, greeting and debriefing, wearing various costumes, including a wizard's cape for University of Magic, throughout the evening.

Meanwhile, MacKessy manned the control room, ensuring contestants didn't get stuck on one puzzle for too long and unlocking certain doors and cabinets as players progressed.

Once the players are in the room, the game master can see and hear them on a monitor. Game masters have something of a crib sheet that tells them when the players should be up to such a point in the game, with suggested clues if they are having difficulty. Some groups manage this better than others.

"Some people just get it, they immediately start looking for the right objects and trying out clever things. Other teams go in there and are just looking at each other, not sure what to do. Those usually need more help," said MacKessy.

If a team gets stuck with a task the game master can send them a clue.

"The way I see it, it's not just a game for the customer, it's a game for us as well. Ours is to get them out, but as close to the one-hour mark as possible. You don't want to give too much help, but you don't want to disappoint them either. Some customers are asking for clues as soon as they get in there, but it wouldn't be any fun if they got out in 25 minutes without solving anything for themselves," he said.

There was a Mission: Impossible-esque moment where the players in University of Magic were agonisingly close to putting the final piece of a puzzle into place (but were very slow in realising it) while at the same time a team in another room (Virginia House, a murder mystery room) were quickly running out of time and needed a clue to be able to finish on time.

Davenport was greeting some fresh arrivals so MacKessy was overseeing all the rooms in operation by himself.

A button in University of Magic needs to be pushed the very moment the players solve this puzzle, opening a cabinet (like magic) and if it is late the illusion is broken or the players might not realise they have solved the puzzle correctly or that anything in the room has changed.

Frantically typing three words of a clue on Virginia House at a time before scurrying back to the wizarding screen to check their progress was the only thing for it and both teams got out in time.

When escape rooms were in their earliest phase it was the norm to have one game master per game, but as employees have gotten used to the process their ability to multitask has grown and this dynamic is not uncommon now.

“Honestly, it’s gotten to a point where I don’t really need to listen to the players anymore, I can tell what clues and hints they need by where the props are and how much time has passed,” he said.

All the while, Davenport was in and out of the control room, sometimes dressed as a wizard and other times donning a police man’s uniform or criminal’s mask and bat, depending on the room he is interacting with.

A great deal of professional pride is evident in both men: they are invested in making sure the experience is as much fun for the groups as possible.

However, in a cost-saving exercise, there is now a push to develop escape rooms that work without the need for a game master. These are being tentatively introduced to the market and it is difficult to see how they can offer the same levels of warmth that an employee well suited to the post could. These are known as autonomous or self-resetting escape rooms.

Creative Works is the manufacturer of one such offering, which was recently installed in Crave Golf in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, US. The two escape rooms are themed Mayday and Zombie Research Lab. Mayday invites visitors to go on a submarine adventure - when the system malfunctions, participants must solve clues to escape before freezing water sinks the submarine. Visitors to Zombie Research Lab are tasked with finding an antidote to the Zombyte virus before the infected group of zombies catches them and turns them into the undead.

While these theoretically work without a game master, that is not how the site is operating them yet. Dylan Brooks, general manager of Crave Golf, told *InterGame*: “If we really wanted to, we could leave the customers completely alone. There is an iPad that they take in there and they can scan different clues. We could just leave them to do that but a lot of people still need a little bit of help with the game to finish them in time.

“I do think we are getting to a point where we don’t need someone looking after them. The player gets three clues for each puzzle, each clue gets closer and closer to telling them what to actually do. As I say, some people still need help, but it’s only a matter of time before we perfect the automated clues so most people get out.”

There is also a time difference. Crave Golf’s are designed to be 30 minutes while Lucardo’s are an hour. But these are two different beasts. Lucardo is a standalone escape room, the visitor comes solely to enjoy that attraction. As well as escape rooms, Crave Golf offers indoor and outdoor mini-golf, bowling and a food and beverage offering. A single attraction that lasts an entire hour might seem clunky.

However, defenders of the one-hour format point out that it offers more flexibility to the players, with some who are unfamiliar with the format taking 10 minutes just to get to grips with the idea. But, if a 30-minute model is intuitive enough to get satisfied players in and out in that time then it is the better choice from a revenue and throughput point of view.

Resetting autonomous escape rooms is also easier, with only a flick of a switch needed. This takes a lot longer with traditional rooms, as there are physical props to put back in cabinets that need to be locked and keys hidden. However, part of the draw of traditional escape rooms is the physical use of items to solve a mystery that creates a sense of reality and immersion that is difficult to recreate digitally.

But digital rooms have the capacity for changeable content, so they are more likely to get previous customers back in the door.

It has been suggested by various commentators that such an intricate amusement could never get to a point where an employee wouldn’t be needed to oversee the game in case something broke or the guests just can’t figure a puzzle out, and if there is going to be a game master there might as well be a good one.

Another advocate of changeable media in escape rooms is Christal Ho, founder of Entermisssion. The Sydney, Australia-based company focuses on the development of virtual reality escape rooms, as well as physical ones.

“Changeable media would get customers back in the door playing in the same room but with different puzzles. This would also mean greatly reducing the cost, time and headaches of having to constantly replace rooms. However, applying changeable media to a physical escape room is difficult. This concept could, however, be applied to VR escape rooms. At Entermisssion, we can play multiple VR escape games in the one room with the click of a button and we are already maximising throughput from a space efficiency perspective. In our future games, we’re exploring ways to have multiple puzzles and paths in the VR escape game so customers will want to come back and play the same game,” she said.

Each of the business’ VR rooms has six rooms that each offer experiences for up to six players each, for a 36 player capacity.

More modern escape rooms lean towards a progressive format, where the group unlocks one room to reveal another and in some cases even a third before the game is solved. When this group moves from one room into the next, another group then enters the first room. This has been a charming addition to the format, but Ho sees these ultimately as a pitfall, rather than a boon.

“It makes sense from a business throughput perspective to have progressive escape rooms as it maximises the number of customers and hence revenue the room can generate,” she said. “However, I don’t see progressive escape

rooms as being a must as it doesn’t necessarily enhance the customer experience, but rather could detract from it. If only a short amount of time is available to customers for one room and they are forced to move onto another room without having completed the first room, they may feel frustrated, particularly if they can complete the second room before the time limit. In a traditional escape room, players have 60 minutes to complete multiple rooms and each group will complete each puzzle and each room at a different rate. Some are slow in the first room but make up their time in the second and subsequent rooms, others are the opposite. A progressive escape room would mean they are unsuccessful if they can’t complete one of the rooms in time, even though they could have completed all of the rooms in the timeframe if it had been a traditional escape room.

When the company opened Escape Hunt Sydney in 2014, most people had never heard of escape rooms and its first rooms had physical padlocks and combination locks with puzzles and clues on laminated pieces of paper.

“Since then, we’ve moved towards electromagnetic locks and technology and our newest rooms have no physical locks but hidden compartments, doors and walls opening through blowing out candles, placing artefacts in the correct places, banging a hammer on an anvil, running on a treadmill, typing a code into a computer and using a mirror to reflect light onto a tree.

“People are now expecting more technology and also greater immersion, so we have spent more on the décor, such as making our walls from fibreglass to look and feel like a medieval stone in a castle, rather than using wallpaper with stone printed on it,” she said.

“Our virtual reality rooms at Entermisssion are even more immersive, where people feel like they’re in zero-G flying through space and



Escape Room City



People giving Entermisssion’s virtual reality escape rooms a go

swimming through piranha-infested waters even though they could never do such things in real life," she added.

If traditional, physical escape rooms are running out of customers it hasn't started to show yet, with businesses in smaller towns performing well.

Some 32km outside Manchester city centre is the small town of Rawtenstall, with a population of about 22,000 people. Such is the confidence in the escape room format that Lucardo has set up a franchise here.

Some of the games are continuations to those in the city centre. For example, University Of Magic: Dragon's Heart continues the story told in the city's University of Magic where students apply to the school; Dragon's Heart follows their first class.

At one point, this site was rated the sixth-best escape room in the world on Trip Advisor. The location's director, Simon Milnes, told *InterGame* that this was due to a combination of a strong brand and excellent customer service. "We bought into this brand because it is a five-star brand, the guys who run Lucardo are all about quality. It's all about maintaining that level of customer service regardless of what happens."

He said that there are so many things going on at any one time that technical issues are inevitable. The slam-dunk, "this is brilliant!" reviews generally come from customers for whom nothing goes wrong, but crisis management and minimising issues when something does go wrong is a big part of keeping reviews positive. This naturally led to the business climbing Trip Adviser's algorithm, which has proven to be a sure-fire way to increase footfall.

"You live and you learn. Last year we had a really hot summer in the UK and we had issues with locks sticking even when the key was turned. I'd never heard of a lock sticking in my life. But we just got a bit of WD 40 and sprayed them and they were fine. Now we know that that is what we need to do if the temperature goes up," he said.

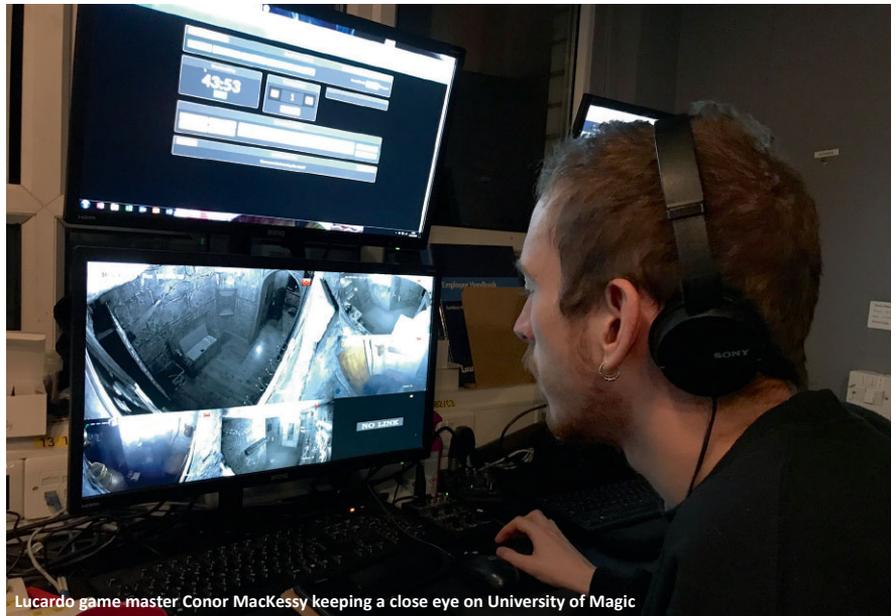
He said a great deal of the job is reading people and knowing what kind of customers they are going to be and using that to get them through the room.

"We get a lot of families and the thing is that adults tend to take over and just don't listen to kids who often spot things that adults don't. If that happens and the parents are just ignoring them I will send a comment like 'Johnny is on to something there!' and they will turn around and ask Johnny what he was saying," said Milnes.

This business exists in a housing terrace and is two connected houses with the walls between them knocked down. "What that means is that we can have rooms that work over three floors. We don't know anywhere else with anything like this," he said.

While it is a relatively young sector, it is unsurprising that it already has its own trade conferences. The largest such show in the US is TransWorld. This is a Christmas and Halloween trade show that has embraced escape rooms.

Its organiser, Rich Bianco, told *InterGame*: "About five years ago, we started noticing vendors bringing in more products related to escape rooms and then bringing in fully formed



escape rooms. Little by little, we realised this deserved its own pavilion on the show, so we set aside an 80,000sq.m pavilion for it. Eventually, the escape rooms side became a show in its own right, Escape Room City, and that is a major part of what we offer now."

He has had an ideal vantage point to watch the games evolve through the years. "The starting price five years ago might have been \$10,000 for a garbage room and now you could be spending well in excess of six figures. And we are seeing that that is the kind of money you need to be spending for an effective room," he said.

From his point of view, escape rooms are destined to take their place as part of a wider amusement offering rather than continue to be a reliable standalone offering. "The reason why these escape rooms have done so well is because attendees already own haunted houses and attractions like that. The escape rooms supplement and add to that experience, which these sites need - a haunted house will do great business around Halloween and then just sit there for the rest of the year. Amusements like escape rooms help turn them into fun parks that can make money the whole year-round."

It is no coincidence that a Christmas and Halloween themed show was one of the earliest adopters of the escape rooms craze. While the

idea of getting out of a puzzle room is fun, the format lends itself to theming. This can also be used to keep escape rooms fresh. One of the biggest issues with the sector is that once you have done one, that's it, the appeal of cracking it is over. But Bianco explained that one aspect of more modern rooms he is seeing exhibited is changing the content so the same customers can come back and enjoy it again and a new Halloween or Christmas theme is an excellent way of promoting the change.

Optimisation and automation are the way of the 21st century, especially in entertainment. Certainly, there is a lot of money an operator stands to save in investing in purely autonomous escape rooms but does that sacrifice the charm that an enthusiastic employee can bring to the table? It is also at the forfeit of the physical interaction with items that is so satisfying. Nothing makes a person feel more like Indiana Jones than placing a hard-earned item on a pedestal and instantaneously hearing a door creak open behind them.

Can't we all just get along? Will the standalone escape room continue to draw customers and offer an interactive human-driven show while the autonomous digital models thrive simultaneously in family entertainment centres and shopping malls? That's something to puzzle over.