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5 Designing escape game activities for language classes

Sascha Stollhans¹

Abstract

Escape games are an increasingly popular leisure activity involving a group of players completing tasks to achieve a pre-defined goal, which is usually escaping from a room. In this chapter, I briefly outline the educational potential of escape game activities in language classes within the frameworks of gamification, pervasive learning, and ‘serious games’, and in relation to transferable skills. This is followed by a description and evaluation of an escape game I developed for a grammar class on the idiomatic uses of German modal verbs. This was piloted with a first-year undergraduate class at Lancaster University. I conclude by discussing student feedback and considerations for similar activities in the future.

Keywords: gamification, game-based learning, games, transferable skills, educational technology.

1. Introduction

Escape games are “live-action team-based games where players discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in one or more rooms in order to accomplish a specific goal (usually escaping from the room) in a limited amount of time” (Nicholson, 2015, p. 1). According to the Financial Times, this “entertainment trend grows rapidly as numbers of UK venues double every six months since

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2013” (McClean, 2016, n.p.). In the light of gamification theories (Nah et al., 2014), it is not surprising that this trend has been picked up by teachers and educators who may appreciate its potential to increase student engagement, collaboration, and emotional involvement in learning.

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the potential educational value of escape games, taking into consideration gamification theory and transferable skills. I then describe an escape game activity I developed for a group of first-year students at an English university, working towards consolidating level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). The activity focuses on idiomatic uses of modal verbs in German and is meant to serve as an example of how escape game activities could be used in language classes. To conclude, I discuss student feedback and potential areas for improvement to keep in mind when designing similar activities in the future.

2. All fun and games... but where is the learning?

2.1. Serious games

Gamification, “the careful and considered application of game thinking to solving problems and encouraging learning using all the elements of games that are appropriate” (Kapp, 2012, p. 12), and game-based learning in the wider field of education, have been a point of discussion for several years (Pivec, 2009; Shelton, Satwicz, & Caswell, 2011). While games in education can increase engagement, enjoyment, and enthusiasm, their actual educational value is sometimes called into question (see Hung, 2017, for an overview of the debate). It is worth exploring the potential of escape games by considering them to be ‘serious games’ within a framework of pervasive learning, i.e. “learning at the speed of need through formal, informal and social learning modalities” (Pontefract, 2013, p. 187). Serious games are defined as “[g]ames that do not have entertainment, enjoyment or fun as their primary purpose” (Michael & Chen, 2006, p. 21). In the case of escape games in language classes, the primary purpose is language learning. For the activity presented below, the specific learning goals were for students to

familiarise themselves with idiomatic uses of German modal verbs. The jigsaw puzzles used (see Section 3) required students to correctly interpret the use of modal verbs; the escape game activity provided the setting and could only be completed once students had accurately completed the linguistic games. Another purpose of using escape game activities can be the development of transferable skills, some examples of which are given in the next section.

2.2. Transferable skills

Apart from language learning, escape games are a great way to support students in developing a number of employability and transferable skills which include, among others, the list below.

- **Team work:** in order to complete the mission as quickly as possible, good team work is essential. Students need to distribute tasks and then bring the results back together in an efficient way.
- **Time management:** as there is a time limit in escape games, good time management is vital.
- **Communication skills:** this goes hand in hand with teamwork.
- **Technological skills:** if digital tools are involved in the game, these will require technological skills.
- **Problem-solving and analytical skills:** as escape games usually involve a number of puzzles and an overall mission (e.g. to work out a password), students need to apply problem-solving and analytical skills.

3. The activity: 'Die Modalverben-Mission'

The escape game activity I developed for first-year students deals with idiomatic uses of modal verbs in German. As the subtle nuances of these are often difficult

to grasp for learners and take some time to develop an intuition for, I decided to include lots of meaningful input, and the exercises focused mainly on reception rather than production.

The overall activity took 50 minutes and was structured in the following way.

Students formed groups of three to four players. The activity was introduced with a video that I had created using the free online tool Powtoon (www.powtoon.com, see Figure 1). The video explained that students needed to complete three stages, which will each give them a hint to help them work out a secret password.

Figure 1. Screenshots of introductory video explaining the ‘mission’ (the first one reads ‘Welcome to this mission’ and the second one reads ‘Your mission: complete the tasks and work out the ^password^!’)



The three activities were jigsaw puzzles which involved matching sentences with their translations or with a description of their idiomatic use of modal verbs. Students could check whether they had solved the puzzle correctly by turning it around to see if a meaningful image had been put together. Each image gave a clue for the final password. Students needed to work this out to complete the mission successfully and be able to ‘escape’ from the room (of course they were not actually physically locked in!).

Each group had only two attempts at guessing the password. This was done via a Google Form, which I had created in such a way that it would only accept the correct password as an answer. The three images were outlines of German, Austrian, and Swiss maps and also showed a car licence plate each; the final

password was DACH (the international vehicle registration codes for Germany (D), Austria (A), and Switzerland (CH) put together; the German word ‘Dach’ also means ‘roof’). Another clue was hidden in the video: the word ‘Passwort’ (‘password’) was bracketed by carets, which resemble a roof (see [Figure 1](#)). The first group who worked this out ‘escaped’ from the game and won a small prize.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Student feedback about this activity, collected via a paper-based questionnaire (n=19), was very positive, describing it as “fun and engaging”. The students liked the idea of working on a grammar topic in such a contextualised way, and enjoyed the competitive and yet collaborative nature of the game. Seven students (36.8 %) commented on transferable skills, e.g. by highlighting that this type of activity requires being able to work as part of a team and to manage one’s time efficiently.

During the workshop at InnoConf2019, a number of ways to improve the activity were discussed. One issue mentioned was to find ways to encourage the use of the target language: the students resorted to using English a lot when communicating in their groups. I did not intervene on this occasion, as I had decided not to intervene at all during the game and the activity was mainly focused on acquiring grammatical knowledge. Another aspect was to consider making use of more digital tools to support the actual activities, for example QR codes could be used to guide students and lead them to interactive online exercises. This is something I will try to implement in the future.

The activity described in this chapter shows that escape game activities do not have to be very complex and difficult to design. Many exercises can be easily transformed into escape games by contextualising them and defining a specific goal that has to be achieved within a certain amount of time. Episode eight of the #MFLTwitterati Podcast ([Dale & Geisel, 2019](#)) is dedicated to escape game activities and provides many hands-on and easy-to-implement ideas.

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