

Study solves lure of escape rooms



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What is it about escape rooms that has led to their proliferation? One local study decided to find out.

The study, funded by Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, sought to understand how people collaborate in escape rooms and if they allow people to effectively collaborate or build such skills in that type of environment.

Over the last few years, escape rooms have begun popping up across Metro Vancouver with more than a dozen currently in operation. Despite the different pop-ups and themes each puzzle-filled room can take on, all work under similar constraints — a time limit of usually an hour with different puzzles to solve, clues hidden about the room, and the team has to work to find the key or code to “escape.”

And according to the research by Carman Neustaedter, Simon Fraser University professor of human-computer interaction, that while escape rooms are meant to be a hands-on entertainment experience in an often creepy space, they also improve collaboration skills.

“They’re really good at fostering verbal communication between teammates,” he said. “I think the draw is just a chance of trying something new that’s fun and exciting, that’s a little bit different.

“People go in for that reason but then what they get out of it is really this opportunity to build relationships and collaboration skills.”



Neustaedter conducted the research over the past summer, working with 10 different groups of about 32 people at the Time Escape where one of the researchers stayed in the room with the groups acting as a fly on the wall, observing them, and then conducting post-game interviews.

“People are quick to drop any social inhibitions that might happen in the real world and just work in a way that you may not with your family or your friends outside of these escape rooms,” he said. “It does get outside of the things that might socially inhibit us in everyday life.”

Neustaedter got the idea to study escape rooms after his research group decided to participate at one for a holiday party, and they managed to escape with 10 seconds left on the clock.

The next thing he wants to do is design and distribute an escape room for long-distance couples that allows them to participate together, with one person in the room and the other is online helping them.

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