



# The joke's on us Looking back at the history of museums and satire

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# Trendswatch

## Escape rooms

*Laura Rutkowski* is game for the latest craze that allows visitors to experience museums in an exciting new way



More than half of UK millennials would prefer to spend money on an experience rather than a possession, according to research by the culture marketing agency Inkling. This is good news for museums seeking to attract 18- to 34-year-olds.

By offering “escape rooms”, venues might have discovered a way to entice new audiences and keep them there. Well, at least for an hour. This is the typical amount of time that teams ranging from two to eight people are locked inside a themed room, incorporating detective, pirate or heist storylines. The goal is to escape by deciphering clues, solving puzzles and using teamwork. A game master hosts the session and gives the team hints if they get stuck.

The craze is on the rise – in 2013, only one escape room existed in Britain, but 598 had emerged by the end of 2016. The Museums Association even ran one – led by Sacha Coward, the community participation producer for Royal Museums Greenwich – as part of the

Festival of Change at last November’s conference and exhibition in Manchester.

There are now almost 1,000 such rooms, says John Sear, the director of Museum Games, which uses digital technologies and game design principles to create experiences for the public.

Sear explains how museums can compete in a world that is dominated by technology. “Museums are all about the real world and real objects,” he says. “They appeal to our need to seek out tangible experiences. This allows connections with new audiences and revenue models, and fresh ways of storytelling.”

Escape rooms, also known as exit games, can operate on any scale and budget. Whether entire galleries are transformed or museums take a DIY paper-based approach with boxes, combination padlocks and creative puzzles, visitors will enjoy the experience. They are also affordable for visitors as they typically fall within the £15 to £25 price bracket.

What Sear cites as one of the

**The 2017 Museums Association conference included an escape room for delegates to crack**

biggest challenges is the reset time taken for the room to be reconfigured for the next team. During my first outing to Escape London in Shepherd’s Bush, west London, an employee told me that a previous team had dismantled one of the escape room tables in the hope that a clue would reveal itself. He assured me that such drastic action was unwarranted – something that would need to be emphasised in a museum.

This could be solved by incorporating tablets for a balance of the virtual and the physical realms, or by allowing teams to play in a gallery that is still open to museum visitors. This would provide higher player turnover and shorter reset times, Sear adds.

Escape rooms allow museums to be creative in their own spaces and play to their strengths. For example, the East Anglian Railway Museum, near Colchester in Essex, transports

you back to the 1950s where your help is required to locate a dossier containing sensitive information used in a spy plot.

In Glasgow’s historic Pollok House, run by the National Trust for Scotland, escapees time travel to the Edwardian period, where a scheming butler must be stopped in his tracks – before it is too late.

University of Cambridge Museums has introduced Cambridge Codebreakers: The Last Secret (see p62), a sophisticated puzzle to solve across four separate sites.

Last Halloween, for one night only, the Infirmary Museum in Worcester invited visitors to escape in the allotted time or risk being locked in the allegedly haunted grounds.

The inspiration interchange between museums and escape rooms goes both ways. Escape Games in Worcester has a room called The Museum. The story is that a secret organisation held meetings there and it is up to players to find out the truth about what went on.

### Mind over matter

A long-term escape room might not be practical for every museum, but it could be an interactive offering to go alongside a temporary exhibition, where people have the chance to learn about the museum without even realising they are doing so.

Instead of being locked in, there is also the option to be locked out. Jane Norris founded the portable Norris Box, which invites players aged seven to 11 to figure out how to unlock a box.

Whether people want to test friends’ ability to work together, team bond with a work group, or want to celebrate in an unconventional way, escape rooms provide fun intellectual entertainment for many.

When participants do escape from the room – bleary-eyed and triumphant (or defeated) – they escape into a different world, that of the museum. And they can then turn their analytic minds to the mysteries held in each carefully curated gallery.

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