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Lived Through This:

What I Overheard as an Escape Room Actor

Lock a group of people in a room and you'll witness some surprising confessions

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Jan 19, 2020 · 6 min read

<https://humanparts.medium.com/things-overheard-as-an-escape-room-actor-ace5eaf954a6>

A few years ago, I was tasked with creating several escape rooms in a historic county park. As the only park employee who happened to be a professional writer and game designer, I became the project's manager. (2) We wanted to make use of a few beautiful old buildings on the park grounds, so the "scary" room I chose was half the second story of a 150-year-old house. The place was frightening enough before we brought in the flickering lamps, skeletons, and strange potions.

(3) And what could be scarier, of course, than stumbling across a live human prisoner in the half-shadows? For a majority of the attempted escapes over those first two years, that human was me. During Halloween season, several hundred patrons would play the escape rooms each week. (4) As they progressed through the house, they would eventually discover that the owner of the place had chained someone to a wall (hi). Supposedly, the owner had imprisoned me for some nefarious reason.

(5) My first responsibility was to scare the group. Once they were scared, my job was to make them generally uncomfortable while offering hints, usually in a cryptic and insane manner.

(6) Was it fun to scare the shrieks out of people when they found me, and then creep them out by staring over their shoulders and babbling nonsense? Of course.

But.

For some reason, though I was clearly standing not a few feet from them, players often treated me like just another prop. It didn't occur to them that I was, you know, alive.

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(7) Due to the nature of the game, I waited in the third room players discovered so they wouldn't notice me at the start. I waited in the dark. Alone. Usually browsing Facebook and chatting with friends online in the gloom, wearing a half-torn shirt and chained to a wall. (8) It would be about 10 or 12 minutes before my big reveal.

My favorite reaction to my reveal was "there's a whole-ass human in here!" I'm not sure what implied I wasn't half-assed.

(9) Overhearing incorrect answers to various problems became my hobby. After all, there isn't much else to do while you're chained to a room. And this is how one can lose faith in humanity.

"We need a five-letter password," someone would exclaim. "It's an animal."

"Aardvark!"

(10) Aardvark. Yes. Obviously. Perhaps the most common five-letter animal. Spelled rdvrk.

"A poisoned fruit," another player would declare. "We need to find a poisoned fruit."

"An apple," the youngest son suggests.

(11) “Don’t be a moron, an apple isn’t a fruit.”

An apple. Isn’t. A. Fruit.

I was in the room when a father barked this at his son. Luckily, I was able to cover up my maniacal laughter just by staying in character as a maniac chained to a wall.

(12) “This scroll says the answer is not in this room. Quick, look in the bookcase.”

You mean... the one in the room where you found the scroll?

That actually happened more than once. It’s almost like entering the escape room made players forget the definition of “not.”

(13) “This chain doesn’t reach.”

“Just make the chain longer, stupid.”

It’s a steel chain bolted to a wall. Did you bring welding gear?

(14) For some reason, the younger players in each group were always ignored by the older ones, who were usually parents. The parents were so sure of their puzzle-solving methods, which tended to be convoluted and incorrect, whereas kids grasped the right answers easily. It was a strange social pattern. (15) In almost every game involving children I had to point out that maybe, just maybe, the kid was right. I did this in a playfully threatening manner along the lines of, “What this little one said is smart. Maybe they will make it out alive.”

(16) I also heard the most astounding put-downs.

“How did you not get a nose bleed from having such a stupid idea?”

“I swear, I don’t care if we lose, can’t you just go outside and be useless there?”

“You can’t be my kid. When we get out, I’m leaving you.”

(17) “There are only four vowels in English. No wonder you got held back in school.”

Often, I would mock their wrong answers with comments like “Good thing I’m not a zombie or I would starve to death with this group” or “I’ve been chained here a while, but do they still teach basic addition in school.” They could take a light-hearted ribbing from the maniac chained to the wall.

(18) Every now and then, a group would go so off-track in solving the puzzles — and be too proud to accept the obvious clues — that they wouldn’t reach me until I’d been hiding for over 45 minutes. Those groups would have zero chance of solving the room.

(19) The room contained some tough puzzles and misdirections, and players were often frustrated — but once, what was said went well beyond what I’d expected.

(20) The name of the room contained the word “dark.” Participants were given lanterns before entering; we’d labeled the room “spooky” and inappropriate for anyone afraid of the dark. One day, The Family showed up to play. (21) As they opened the door, I could hear them chattering about how they were going to break every record. As soon as I heard that, I knew it was time to open Facebook — it would be a while.

(22) When they reached my room, the mother sat on a bench, quite distressed.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Well,” she answered, “I had no idea it was going to be so dark.”

Then. That’s when things got weird.

(23) “They gave us lights, Mom, help me figure out what these goblets mean.”

“I can’t think straight,” she says. “I can’t solve these. Must be my medication.”

The oldest son dropped the bomb. “Sure mom, medication, you can call it that now.”

An argument ensued:

(24) “I need my medication.”

“No, no, mom, you don’t, it’s killing you.”

Then her reply, forever burned into my memory:

“I wouldn’t need to do drugs if I didn’t have you.”

I probably don’t have to tell you. They did not escape the room.

(25) No matter what, every group ignored the instructions: things like “If it doesn’t move, don’t force it” and “You will not need to remove paintings from the walls.” These instructions were guaranteed to have someone forcing paintings from the walls.

(26) Playing escape rooms when you’re not quite sober may sound like a fun idea, but my most startling moment on the job was when a group of drunken players decided their only course of action was to pull up the room’s wall-to-wall carpeting.

(27) “There’s carpeting! Larry, houses like this never have carpeting!” rang the player’s too-loud victory cry.

Yes, that table with the strange hexagram painted on it and all of those different sized brooms you keep finding are clearly not important, so the answer must lie underneath the carpeting. (28) Not a prop. The real carpeting in the building. We had to reschedule the next few games because laying carpet was never part of the established reset sequence.

You may think being an escape room actor is an interesting job. The better word is baffling.