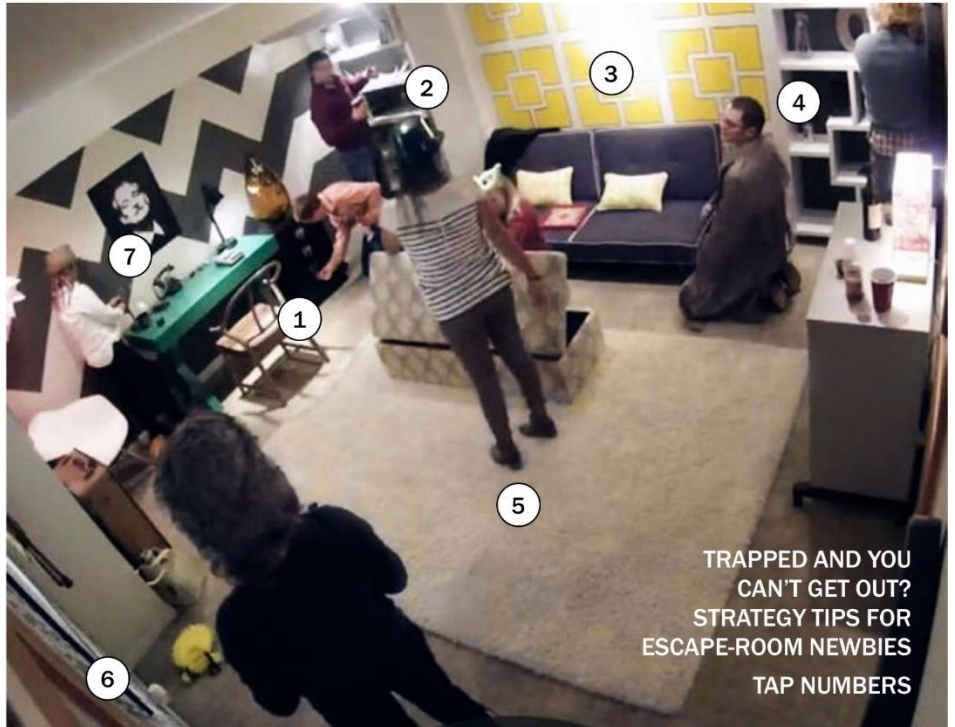


PURSUIITS

The escape room—a Rubik’s Cube that locks the door behind you

By Tessa Berenson



‘Escape Rooms’ Are Video Games Come to Life

The new pastime is like a Rubik’s cube that locks the door behind you

I really need a hint. I’m locked in a room that I can’t figure out how to get out of, and the whir of a timer by the door reminds me that valuable minutes are ticking by. “I think we should ask for help,” I say.

No response from the eight others stuck in this Washington, D.C., office building with me, each working on different clues. A tattooed guy in flowered sweatpants is holding a magnifying glass to a map of Paris. My boyfriend is kneeling on the floor trying to divine a clue among patterned pieces of cardboard and a fuzzy blanket. I’ve been working on decoding some glowing lines and squiggles on the wall—and I’m stumped. I say again, “Shouldn’t we ask for a hint?”

No one replies, except for one woman who glares at me. Clearly we are going to have to find our way out of here on our own, without any help from the man watching us via a camera on the ceiling. And we have only 35 minutes left.

This is an escape room. They're popping up all over the country, from San Diego to Denver to Boston, nearly 400 in all at about 150 different facilities. The premise is simple: people pay about \$30 each to get locked in a room filled with oblique clues—hidden objects, puzzles, riddles, encryptions that unlock boxes and so on—that, when solved, will allow them to discover a password, code or key that opens the door and leads to freedom and glory, or at least a drink. Generally players have about 60 minutes. Here in the Double Agent's Digs at Escape Room Live D.C., just over half the groups get out in time. That drops to around 20% for those who don't take hints.

The original escape room, a weekend-long installation in Kyoto in 2007, was inspired by online flash games in which players click around their virtual surroundings to find clues that lead to their liberation. The translation of the video games to real life was so popular that the rooms spread to China, Europe and then the U.S., when the Japanese company SCRAP Entertainment opened a San Francisco location in 2012. No one firm holds the rights to the idea, so anyone with some windowless real estate and a way with dead bolts can launch a room. It's not a bad investment: some facilities around the U.S. are on track to rake in six figures a year.

It's increasingly rare that a group of people has to work together creatively to solve a problem without the use of any screens or the Internet, which may be a big part of the appeal. Corporate entities have even used the rooms for team-building exercises. Ginger Flesher-Sonnier, a former math teacher and owner of the D.C. escape space, fell in love with the idea on a trip to Europe. "I've always loved puzzles and riddles and crosswords and scavenger hunts," she says, "and these are a combination of all of that."

Each room presents a different scenario. There is one in Nashville where you must recover a stolen painting concealed somewhere between the four walls. In New York City you attempt to escape from a tiny Manhattan apartment. Los Angeles places you in a serial killer's basement, as seen last season on *The Bachelorette*. My team—mostly couples in their early 30s—has been told that we are secret agents trapped in an office while trying to ferret out a double agent. The 45-minute task is twofold: figure out the double agent's next drop location and find a key to free ourselves.

The first few minutes in the room are hectic and disorienting, with no clear sense of where, or even how, to begin. There are two bookcases along the back wall, which is covered in a geometric yellow pattern. (Is it just hipster decoration? Or a road map filled with crucial clues?) A portrait of Bill Murray hangs on another wall, overlooking a couch, a stool, a few desks and random objects everywhere—including a Darth Vader mask. We decide the best approach is to divide and conquer.

One person starts flipping through books; another rifles desk drawers. My boyfriend fiddles with a suspiciously heavy can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I examine a series of colored, numbered

vases. The next 20 minutes are a blur as we fumble around, examining tchotchkes and maps of D.C. streets, trying to be useful. Mostly we are just lost—yelling out scattered directives and questions that don't get a response: Time is running out! Have we used this big metal key for anything yet? We need to communicate more! Why is there a blond wig on the floor?

We eventually jell as a group, figuring out the roles each of us will play. I've never loved math, nor am I good with riddles, and I soon realize that being held in a three-dimensional puzzle designed by a former math teacher may actually be my worst nightmare. At one point we discover a brain teaser, and I feel panic welling as we read it together. But a man behind me blurts out the answer immediately. "Look at you!" I cheer and give him a high five. Maybe morale boosting will be my chief contribution.

With 20 minutes left, the nine of us crowd around a whiteboard staring at a word we've written, a word we're sure contains everything we need to root out the double agent, unlock the door and win the game. The word is pickle.

Which is what we are in, but at least now we're all working together, focused on manipulating the letters of this briny vegetable into a way out. It takes a few minutes of retracing old clues and trying different methods of translating the letters into numbers, but eventually we do it. Some 28 minutes after we first walked into the room, the nine of us emerge, just four minutes shy of record time.

Afterward a man named Hop Dang, who had been manning the camera, debriefs us while laughing about our more egregious missteps. He asks how we thought it went, and the responses range from the bewildered—"I blacked out. I have no idea what just happened"—to the smug—"I can't believe some people don't get out in time."

Then the woman who frowned when I asked for help says, pointedly, "I'm glad we never asked for a hint. I have way too much pride to ever do that." Even Dang says I surrendered too early. "If you'd asked for a hint that soon, I wouldn't have given it to you anyway," he teases.

Dang says he's seen some groups totally click and others, usually families, devolve into epic fights. In the interest of thorough reporting, I did one with my family in New York City to see if he was right. The experience didn't ruin any relationships, but we didn't make it out in time and were publicly shamed for it. There's now a picture on Escape the Room NYC's official Facebook page of my family holding up a big sign that says LOSERS. I learned that I'd rather win the game using hints than fail with my pride. It may be less satisfying to get free knowing you needed a few tips, but that celebratory cocktail afterward will taste a lot better than if you didn't get out at all.

This appears in the August 31, 2015 issue of TIME.