

# **04** How to Value an Object: **Storytelling and Philosophy in Educational Escape Room Design**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper documents a workshop held as part of the Summer School. The aim of the workshop was to explore the didactic possibilities of escape rooms as a learning experience, especially with regard to the combination of spatial arrangement and narratives. The workshop addressed the question of how escape rooms can be designed to promote learner engagement with the abstract topic of value(s). Although values are linked to objects and experiences, they are nonetheless intangible. We emphasize that it is important to address value issues in education to enable learners to take different perspectives, recognize different dimensions of values and understand the context of values (economic, social, cultural, ethical). The workshop combines philosophical considerations with storytelling to convey the meaning of concepts such as value in a tangible form. An exemplary story about a can of tomatoes serves as evidence of the link between personal, economic and aesthetic values. The story is divided into three episodes, each representing one of these areas of value. The tomato can serve as a tangible object to illustrate the different value systems and the nuances of valuation in human experience. The workshop participants were involved in a co-design process that included discussions, decisions and sketches for possible escape rooms on the topic of value(s).

### KEYWORDS

Story telling, philosophy, Escape Room Design, values

### PERMALINK

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## 1. Introduction: Purpose and Context

- 1 This paper documents the conceptual development and workshop design process we carried out for the Summer School ‘Beyond the Lock: Innovative Approaches to Escape Rooms in Education, Culture, and Organizational Development’ (July 2024).<sup>1</sup> Rather than presenting a research article, we offer a reflective account and methodological outline. Our aim was to explore how escape rooms – typically known for entertainment – can be repurposed for educational contexts, especially when dealing with abstract, multi-dimensional concepts such as values.
- 2 Drawing on our backgrounds in storytelling and philosophy, we designed a workshop inviting the participants of the Summer School to co-create escape room scenarios centred on the theme of values. After all, we live in a pluralistic world with diverging – and often conflicting – value orientations. By combining narrative design with philosophical reflection, we sought to demonstrate how abstract concepts can be made accessible, tangible, and emotionally engaging.

## 2. Why Values? Educational Rationale

- 3 The concept of values is notoriously complex. Values shift across historical, cultural, and personal contexts. They are intangible, yet they shape our behaviours, preferences, and ethical stances.<sup>2</sup> In education, addressing values means encouraging learners to navigate ambiguity, question norms, and reflect on personal and societal priorities.
- 4 However, engaging with values in a classroom or training setting can easily remain abstract. Our approach was to explore how values can be experienced – rather than merely discussed – by embedding them in a playful, immersive learning format. Escape rooms, when thoughtfully designed, offer a multisensory and participatory way of encountering such elusive topics.

1 This paper is a revised version of an earlier, more extensive draft. We are grateful to Anja Grebe for her careful and insightful review comments. The editing and restructuring of the revised version were supported by the use of ChatGPT, which assisted in refining the structure, improving stylistic clarity, and enhancing coherence. The images were generated by using DALL-E.

2 Simmel, Georg (2004 [1900]). *The Philosophy of Money* (3rd ed.), trans. D. Frisby & T. Bottomore. London: Routledge. Sommer, Andreas Urs (2024). *Values. Why We Need Them Although They Don't Exist*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42159-4>.

### 3. The Design Rationale: Narrative + Philosophy

- 5 We based our workshop design on two guiding principles:
- Philosophical structuring helps clarify abstract notions like value, utility, aesthetics, and ethics.
  - Narrative design translates these abstractions into emotionally resonant experiences through character, setting, and plot.

The convergence of these two approaches allows for a creative tension: while philosophy frames the concept, storytelling gives it life. Learners are invited to not just reflect about values but to encounter them on an emotional level through story-based scenarios.

### 4. The Tomato Can Story: A Narrative Prototype

- 6 As a proof of concept, we developed a narrative structured in three episodes while preparing the workshop. Each episode highlights a different domain of value:
- Personal Value: A tomato can telephone from childhood represents emotional and familial bonds. It symbolizes the personal history and playfulness of the protagonist's early years. (Fig. 1)
  - Economic Value: The same can reappears in a factory context, illustrating alienation in industrial labour. It introduces questions about production, remuneration, and commodification. (Fig. 2)
  - Aesthetic Value: In a final twist, the tomato can is linked to Pop Art and the art market, raising questions about taste, fame, and the monetization of creativity. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 1

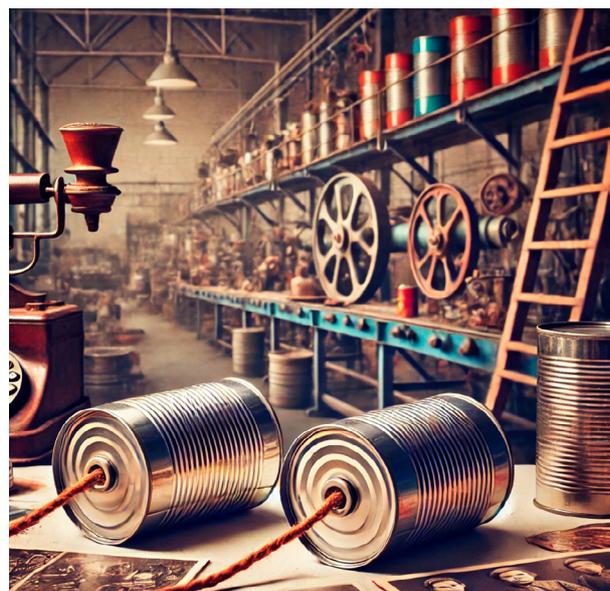


Fig. 2

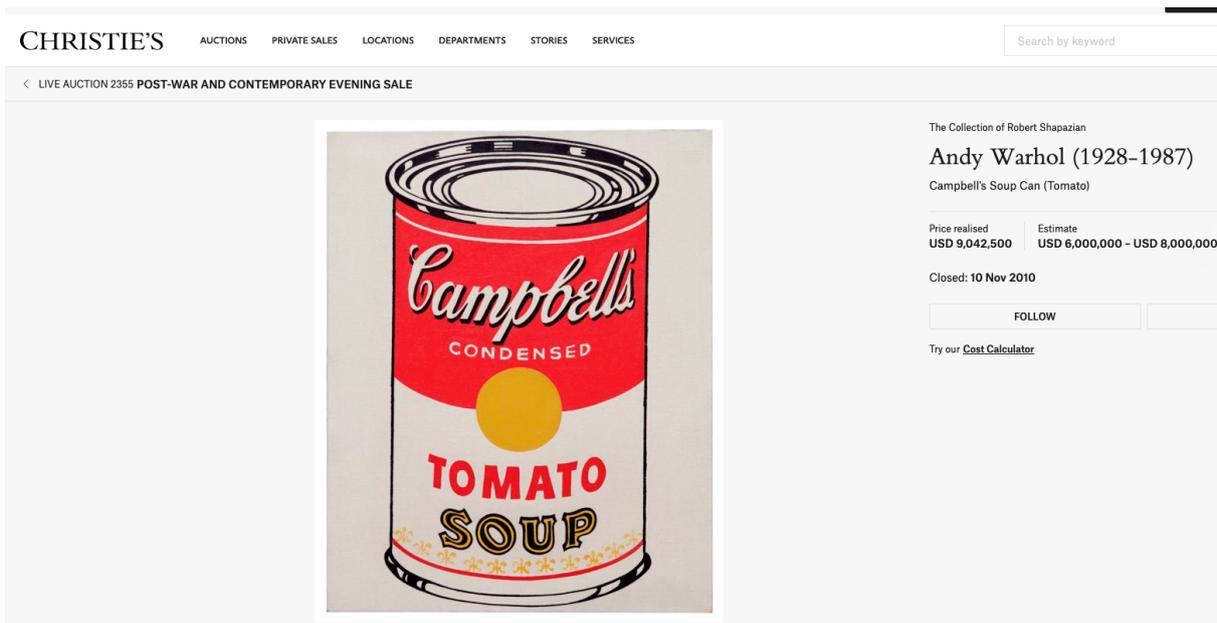


Fig. 3

- 7 This evolving role of a single object – the tomato can – demonstrates how different value systems and value-based experiences intersect and conflict. It also shows how narratives can structure learning experiences around these intersections.

## 5. Building Blocks for Story-Based Educational Design

### 5.1. Storytelling in Education

- 8 Narratives allow abstract themes to become emotionally and cognitively accessible. In our example, the tomato can becomes a vehicle for tracing value transformations across life stages and social domains. Identifiable protagonists,<sup>3</sup> emotional resonance, and biographical arcs create points of entry for learners, connected to their own experiences.
- 9 The use of common experiences (e.g., playing with cans, alienating work, exposure to iconic artworks) ensures relatability. Stories offer development – transformation through challenge – which mirrors the learner’s own potential journey.

3 Jenni, Karen & Loewenstein, George (1997). “Explaining the ‘Identifiable Victim Effect.’” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 14, 235–257.

## 5.2. Theories of Value: A Historical Sketch

10 We presented participants with a condensed history of value concepts:

- Physiocratic Theory: Value from land and nature (17th–18th c.).
- Labour Theory: Value from human effort (18th–19th c.).
- Subjective Theory: Value from individual preferences and desire (late 19th c. onward).

Each reflects societal structures and ideologies – from feudal landholding to industrial capitalism to consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> Understanding these shifts enables learners to grasp how today's valuations (economic, aesthetic, ethical) are historically contingent and contested.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. The Workshop Process: From Story to Escape Room

We structured the workshop as a four-round co-creation process:

11 **Round 1: Exploring Personal Notions of Value**

- Participants discuss personal and societal values.
- Reflections are mapped visually to identify commonalities and contrasts.

The following questions can be used for guiding the discussion:

- What is my definition of value(s)?
- What do I value most? What do I value least? Why?
- Which material values are important to me? Why?
- Which immaterial or ideal values are important to me? Why?

12 **Round 2: Selecting a Value-Laden Object**

- Groups choose an object that symbolized value in multiple dimensions.
- The object serves as an anchor for storytelling.

13 **Round 3: Creating Narratives**

- Participants imagine stories involving the object in emotional, economic, and aesthetic contexts.
- Narrative arcs are developed, integrating character transformation and value shifts.

4 Goux, Jean-Joseph (2000). *Frivolité de la valeur*. Paris: Blusson. Goux, Jean-Joseph (2011). *Le trésor perdu de la finance folle*. Paris: Blusson.

5 Herscovici, Alain (2024). *Value, Historicity, and Economic Epistemology*. Springer. Orléan, André (2014). *The Empire of Value: a new foundation for economics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Sommer (2024).

The following questions can be used for guiding the process:

- Which stories can you imagine that structure the escape room dedicated to the question of value?
- How is the object linked to memories and experiences in the context of one's family or friendships?
- How is the object linked to practices of production, exchange and trade in the sense of its economic value?
- How could the object be used in an art context? What would be the aesthetic value of it?

#### 14 Round 4: Designing the Escape Room

- Groups sketch spatial and interactive elements.
- Riddles and puzzles are linked to the value-based narrative.

The following questions can be used to guide the process:

- How do you imagine the space in which the escape room game takes place?
- Make descriptions or drawings and sketches of the space.
- How could riddles and puzzles be integrated in the environment?

Although time constraints limited the completion of all four rounds, the process fostered rich exchanges and meaningful reflection. We recommend allocating ample time to the initial storytelling phase.

## 7. Conclusion: Reflections and Future Directions

- 15 Ideally, this workshop should serve as the starting point for any process aimed at developing an educational escape room around the theme of value(s). Its strength lies in connecting personal and subjective experiences with one of the most pressing and multifaceted challenges of contemporary life. In a world shaped by diverse worldviews and shifting norms, stable value orientations are increasingly rare. This makes it all the more essential to create learning environments that allow for critical reflection, plural perspectives, and personal resonance.
- 16 What became particularly evident during the workshop was that many participants were surprised by the emotional depth of the discussions. Although the initial task – designing an escape room – might have seemed primarily playful or conceptual, it quickly invited participants to share personal stories and biographical memories. These moments, such as the story of a family farm and questions of inheritance, revealed how deeply values are entangled with lived experience. The storytelling framework did not

just support this outcome – it actively made it possible. By encouraging personal narrative, it opened a path to emotionally engage with an otherwise abstract topic.

- 17 The co-creative structure of the workshop is not merely a pedagogical tool, it is integral to the learning objective itself. Through shared storytelling and collaborative exploration, participants generate meaning together, engaging in dialogue that enriches understanding and fosters empathy. Such formats are particularly effective in smaller group settings – whether in schools, universities, associations, or cultural institutions – where they can catalyse deep reflection and creative exchange.
- 18 It is our hope that this methodology will inspire others to experiment with story-based, philosophically grounded escape room designs. Beyond the specific topic of value(s), the approach we outline can be adapted to other complex educational themes, helping learners articulate what matters to them – and why.

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## About the authors

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