

DIGITAL JOURNAL FOR ARTS & CULTURAL STUDIES DIGITALES JOURNAL FÜR KUNST- & KULTURWISSENSCHAFTEN



BEYOND THE LOCK

VOLUME 02

BEYOND THE LOCK

Universität für
Weiterbildung
Krems



Imprint/Impressum

DAC – Digital Journal for Arts & Cultural Studies | Digitales Journal für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften | Publisher/Herausgeber: Department für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften, Universität für Weiterbildung Krems, Dr.-Karl-Dorrek-Straße 30, 3500 Krems | info@dac-journal.com | www.dac-journal.com

Beyond the Lock Introduction

Natalie Denk,
Anja Grebe,
Helmut Neundlinger,
Klaus Neundlinger

PERMALINK

<https://doi.org/10.48341/dwke-gj41>

DAC – Digital Journal for Arts & Cultural Studie

Escape rooms, as interactive and immersive experiences, have gained significant popularity worldwide. Originating as live-action, team-based games, they offer an engaging blend of storytelling, puzzle-solving, and collaboration. Participants are challenged to uncover clues, solve riddles, and complete tasks within a limited time, typically with the ultimate goal of ‘escaping’ the room. This unique form of entertainment—situated between play, reflection, and narrative immersion—has evolved from various influences, including live-action role-playing, point-and-click adventure games, puzzle hunts, interactive theater, and museum education programs. Appealing across age groups, professions, and cultural contexts, escape rooms have become not only a widespread leisure activity but also a valuable medium for education, cultural experience, and organizational development. Their adaptability allows them to be tailored for diverse themes and narratives, offering rich potential for creativity, engagement, and innovation.

The development of escape rooms from the 2000s onwards initially took place independently of cultural or educational institutions and with a primarily commercial intention. Only in recent years, cultural heritage institutions—museums, collections, archives, and archaeological sites—have discovered the potential of escape room dramaturgy for educational purposes. Spaces, objects, documents, and stories that are often perceived as remote, abstract, or inaccessible prove particularly well suited to the exploratory, puzzle-oriented approach typical of escape room experiences. The detective-like process of searching, decoding, and interpreting offers striking parallels to research, education, and curatorial practice in historical collections and cultural institutions.

This convergence of previously distinct domains has sparked new questions—both theoretical and practical—about how scholarly engagement with museum and archival holdings can intersect with playful, immersive modes of communication. Beyond the creation of individual projects, the challenge lies in developing systematic frameworks that connect curatorial research, visitor studies, and game-based learning. At this interface between education and curating—what could be called ‘edu-curating’—hidden or overlooked aspects of collections come to light: What remains unseen, locked away, or untranslated? What is the interpretive potential of empty spaces, sealed doors, or messages that resist immediate comprehension?

The Summer School “Beyond the Lock: Innovative Approaches to Escape Rooms in Education, Culture, and Organizational Development” took place at the University

for Continuing Education Krems in July 2024. It brought together professionals from diverse fields of museum work, media design, education, and organizational development to explore the educational, cultural, and social dimensions of escape rooms. Game designers, cultural mediators, educators, museum professionals, organizational developers, researchers, students, and enthusiasts shared insights and practices from this rapidly evolving field. The lectures, workshops, and discussions now form the foundation for the second issue of DAC – Digital Journal for Arts and Cultural Studies. The following contributions examine the many facets of escape rooms through concrete examples—from educational innovation and participatory design to curatorial reflection and artistic interpretation.

Inga Specht introduces *Project Pollination: A Buzzing Rescue*, a digital educational escape game developed at the Museum Koenig Bonn (Leibniz Institute for the Analysis of Biodiversity Change) in collaboration with the game consultancy Pfeffermind. Designed to raise awareness of biodiversity and pollinator conservation, the project investigates whether and how escape games can effectively convey scientific knowledge through playful interaction.

Mirjam Duvivié, Roland Lehner and Fares Kayali report on the co-creation of an educational escape game with vocational students in Upper Austria. Their contribution, *Participatory Design of an Educational Escape Game about Alcohol and Partying*, reflects on empowerment, authenticity, and participatory design frameworks, showing how young learners' lived experiences can shape educational game design.

In *How to Value an Object*, **Ines Häufler and Klaus Neundlinger** present the conceptual and methodological framework of their workshop at the 2024 Summer School. Combining storytelling and philosophy, they demonstrate how abstract ideas such as “value” can become tangible and emotionally resonant through narrative-based escape room design.

Dominik Heher, in *The Thin Line Between Fact and Fiction*, discusses *Mission: Golden Panther*, an escape adventure at the Schallaburg exhibition center (Lower Austria). His reflection explores how narrative, object, and puzzle design interweave with historical context, raising questions about curatorial authorship, mediation, and the gamification of heritage.

Anna Sieroslowski, in her article on *TimeShift — Journey into Tomorrow*, provides practical insights into developing an escape room within the inclusive exhibition format *Dialogue in the Dark*, which allows sighted visitors to experience the perceptual world of blind and visually impaired people.

In *A Night in the Museum*, **Ran Peleg, Yael Bamberger, and Dorit Wolenitz** present a hybrid curatorial model in which a Natural History exhibition transforms into an escape game after hours. Their study shows how this “museum by day, game by night” approach engages new audiences through teamwork and play, while offering fresh ways to connect visitors with scientific collections.

Ran Peleg and Neta Shaby, in *Solving Educational Escape Room Games*, analyze how groups collaborate and engage with scientific content in classroom-based escape games. Their findings highlight the tension between speed and learning, showing that the balance between design and facilitation critically shapes educational outcomes.

Nina Schedlmayer (art journalist) and **Helmut Neundlinger** (director of the Archive of Contemporaries) present an interview with artist Deborah Sengl about her trilogy of escape rooms. The conversation explores how Sengl translates themes such as flight, child poverty, and the legacy of Johann Strauss into experiential works that blur installation, performance, and play.