

# 05 **About The Archivist's Dream.** A brief documentation of the escape game at the Archives of Contemporary Arts and research on the project

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### ABSTRACT

The paper briefly summarises the development process and key aspects of the Escape Game *The Archivist's Dream*, developed in cooperation between the Archives of Contemporary Arts and the Centre for Applied Game Studies. The results of two existing scientific studies, one of which includes a visitor survey, outline the positioning of this Escape Game and are also presented.

### KEYWORDS

archives, escape room games, cultural heritage, cultural mediation

### PERMALINK

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- 1 Since autumn 2021 the Archives of Contemporary Arts is running the live escape game *The Archivist's Dream*, which is located on the premises of the Archives. As a facility of the provincial government of Lower Austria, the institution is affiliated with the Faculty of Education, Arts and Architecture of the University for Continuing Education Krems (UWK) and located on Campus Krems. The Archives' collecting strategy has been interdisciplinary from the beginning, it contains literary estates of artistic provenance from the fields of music, literature, film and architecture.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the main archival tasks of preserving, processing and making accessible the collections, the assignments of the Archives also include the conception and realization of research projects, scientific conferences and publications. Readings, concerts and discussions with artists, as well as small exhibitions are part of the Archives' educational concept and aim to reach a wider audience.
- 2 The initial idea of creating an escape game on the Archives' premises arose from the uniqueness of the space itself. Situated in the basement between a modern office building and an arthouse cinema there are four work rooms, which were designed by the well-known Austrian architect Adolf Krischanitz (born 1946), as well as storage rooms. Inside a large black cube that takes up most of the lower area, there are four identical workspaces, differing only in the type of wood used in their design. The interior furnishing of the study rooms, which are lit by artificial skylights, can be described as simple, but elegant: a table, two brass lights and a surrounding shelving unit with drawers and compartments. The design and layout create a strong atmospheric effect and embody the idea of an archive rather than its practical requirements. Using this challenge in a playful and productive way was one of the ideas behind setting up an escape game in the Archives.
- 3 Another impulse was that archival work itself can often be like solving a puzzle. When organizing, listing and cataloguing an artist's estate, for example, the archivist has to decipher handwriting, arrange manuscripts and other documents or identify correspondents. These typical archival activities could serve as central elements of the game and at the same time they could convey the tasks and work of and within an archive. Working closely with the Archives of Contemporary Arts the Center for Applied Game Studies at UWK was commissioned in 2019 with the development of an escape room within the Archives' premises, featuring archival work and the Archives' estates.<sup>2</sup>

1 <https://www.archivderzeitgenossen.at/en/the-archives/> (accessed 01/2025).

2 Koenig, Nikolaus; Denk, Natalie; Wimmer, Simon & Prandstätter, Hanna (2022). Creating an Escape Room for Cultural Mediation: Insights from 'The Archivist's Dream.' In Proceedings of the 16th European Conference on Games Based Learning 16, edited by Conceição Costa, Filipe Luz, and Nuno Fachada, 297–306. p. 297.

- 4 A key challenge in the development process was the grade of difficulty of the game. The aim was to create a game which required no prior knowledge about the artists.<sup>3</sup> Another question was: Which works or information could be symbolic or representative for the entire oeuvre of an artist? It soon became clear that the escape game should not only be dedicated to presenting one collection or one artist but should show the different artistic disciplines contained in the Archives. A selection therefore had to be made.
- 5 The final selection of two estates of writers (Peter Turrini, Julian Schutting) and the estate of the composer Friedrich Cerha was based on the following ideas: To exemplify the diversity of material in a multidisciplinary archive, the presentation was limited to two artistic genres. The Archives' music and literature collections are also much more extensive than those of the other disciplines, which is further justification for the selection. Also the purchase of the bequests of Friedrich Cerha and Peter Turrini by the Province of Lower Austria led to the founding of the Archives of Contemporary Arts in 2010 in the first place.
- 6 The first drafts of the escape room focused on art education/cultural mediation and centered heavily on the artists' works, which meant that the archive theme was pushed in the background. It also quickly became evident that there was a high risk of false content simplifications. The aim was to provide a realistic picture of the work in an archive and its collections.<sup>4</sup> As Koenig et al point out, *The Archivist's Dream* is positioned at the intersection of cultural mediation and serious games, as educating players about special topics is not the main goal of the game, but still part of it.<sup>5</sup> Brinkmann offers a more specific categorization when she introduces the term CHLEG (Cultural Heritage Live Escape Game) for escape games set in cultural heritage sites.<sup>6</sup> The special feature of CHLEGS is the authenticity of the location and the content conveyed, which should raise players' interest in the topic and the institution.<sup>7</sup>
- 7 The game structure consists of puzzles that build on each other and need to be solved to open further rooms and get closer to solving the 'main puzzle'. A fictional story, also referred to in the title, frames the game: The character of a female archivist is presented to the players in a short interactive computer game at the beginning. The actual escape game starts when the archivist in the computer game falls asleep while searching for

3 Koenig et al (2022) p. 298.

4 Koenig et al (2022) p. 298.

5 Koenig et al (2022) p. 298.

6 Brinkmann, Hanna; Potz, Brigitta; Wimmer, Simon & Denk, Natalie (2024). Exploring Archival Practices: Unveiling Cultural Heritage Through a Live Escape Room Experience. DAC – Digital Journal for Arts & Cultural Studies, 1. <https://doi.org/10.48341/j72z-sy48>.

7 Brinkmann et al (2024) p. 5.

the final sentence of a manuscript by the author Julian Schutting. The main goal of the escape game is finding this final sentence and, by doing so, waking up the archivist. The use of archival documents, or their replicas, plays an important role in the game. An attempt has been made to give the players real insights into the archive boxes, which for the game have been filled with facsimiles of a passport, pieces of correspondence, photos, manuscript pages, notes, music sheets and similar materials. In classification puzzles, players must find out the connections between individual objects and their owners. Another type of puzzle are classic deciphering tasks in which players identify number or letter codes from manuscripts, pieces of music or pictures.

- 8 *The Archivist's Dream* was intended to offer an engaging experience for new audiences. It mostly works without prior knowledge or even interest in the archive work, the artists or the archive materials. It is designed with the aim to turn a topic which some visitors might initially not consider relevant into a personal experience that can subsequently lead to an authentic interest in the topic. An online survey of players, conducted and analyzed by Hanna Brinkmann, shows a largely positive response: 77.11% liked the escape room game 'very much', 18.07% liked it, 3.61% were indifferent, and 1.20% did not like it at all (N=83).<sup>8</sup> The originality of the puzzles, the social experience of solving puzzles together and the overall experience were positively emphasized.
- 9 Although the authentic location was not the main motivation for the visit, it was mentioned several times in the detailed evaluation.<sup>9</sup> One of the findings from the study is that some players wanted more background knowledge and context before and after the game. For technical (reset time) and resource reasons, it is not possible to provide a detailed debriefing after the game. As a workaround, a handout has been designed with information about the Archives and its collections as well as the content covered in the game. The study concludes that – as with any use of serious games for educational purposes – the escape game could only be an additional tool in the Archives' educational work and that strategies were needed to encourage players to participate in further events offered by the Archives. As *The Archivist's Dream* was always planned as an additional offer among other cultural mediation measures, the study confirms the direction, design and implementation of the game to reach new audiences and introduce them to the Archives and its premises, tasks and selected estates for the first time.

8 Brinkmann et al (2024) p. 12.

9 Brinkmann et al (2024) p. 13.

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