

# When Space Becomes Cardboard: Rethinking Escape Room Narratives in Tabletop Games

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## ABSTRACT

The proposed paper examines the intermedial transfer of the escape room phenomenon from fully embodied, spatially grounded experiences to their tabletop counterparts. As Bakk and Makai argue, the escape room format (ERF) is defined by a distinctive interplay of presence and agency, whose intensity is shaped by the medium through which the experience is delivered (2025). Building on this, the present study focuses on how narrative mechanisms of physical escape rooms are selectively reconfigured in tabletop games, rather than directly adapted across media.

In contemporary board games, gameplay is only one dimension of the experience; games also constitute a system of signs, allowing analysis not only of formal features but also of the communicative structures, namely their narratives (Mochocka, 2015). The study therefore examines how narrative structure, worldbuilding, and puzzle pacing are transformed when escape room experiences are translated into rule-based, materially constrained tabletop systems.

Narrativity in escape rooms is inextricably linked to the continuous, puzzle-driven progression of play (Clare 2016). The difficulty curve typically intensifies toward the midpoint of the experience (Heinonen 2018), producing a sense of flow (Csíkszentmihályi 1990), at the same time uncovering narrative segments through effort to advance the story - as the ergodic process (Aaerseth 1997). This effort, in turn, amplifies narrative involvement (Calleja 2011), through which the player's mental model gradually aligns with the logic of the fictional world (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008).

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Physical escape rooms exploit their spatial and multisensory materiality to facilitate strong forms of immersive presence (Murray 1997; Ryan 2001). On the narrative level, escape rooms construct a storyworld (Ryan & Thon 2014; Kubiński 2015). Because narrative progression depends on exploratory and problem-solving actions, escape rooms often generate emergent narration, arising from players situated interaction with designed affordances. The combination of structured world-building and player-driven emergence supports strong mental absorption (McMahan 2003) and facilitates the suspension of disbelief (Kirkpatrick 2004).

The growing popularity of escape rooms—further intensified by the conditions of the pandemic—opened the possibility for the format to expand into the domain of tabletop games. This transition exemplifies intermediality, understood as a process that “must be understood as a bridge between media differences that is founded in media similarities” (Elleström 2020). Transposing escape rooms into board games differs from other forms of game adaptation, as escape rooms rely fundamentally on spatial and multisensory engagement. As Marco Arnaudo writes in *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game*, narrative in board games emerges from the synergy between the rules of the game, its material components, and the actions performed by the player (Arnaudo, 2018). Board games function as a “transmedial narrative system” (Mochocka & Mochocki, 2017), meaning in practice that they exhibit emergent properties: simple components, when placed in interaction, generate complex gameplay systems (Petrowicz, 2017). A board game may thus be understood as comprising an external three-dimensional space (size, weight, and other physical attributes), an external two-dimensional space (typographic elements, illustrations on the box or cards), and an internal space, which consists of the rules and the gameplay built upon them. This reveals the intermedial nature of the system and of the narrative that arises through the combination of multiple media - image, text, and more (Mochocka, 2015).

To examine this intermedial shift, the study draws on a corpus of tabletop escape-room games selected for their prominence within the Polish board-game market. The corpus intentionally combines internationally recognised series that have achieved considerable popularity in Poland - *Deckscape* and *EXIT: The Game* - with series created by Polish designers, namely *Escape Tales* and *Side Quest*. From each series, the highest-rated title on BoardGameGeek, the largest international platform for aggregating player evaluations, was selected for detailed analysis.

Methodologically, the project combines autoethnographic playthrough analysis with intermedial analysis and comparative design study. The autoethnographic component consists of paired playthroughs conducted by two researchers with differing experience in board games and physical escape rooms. Each session is followed by individual reflective notes capturing divergent interpretations of narrative progression, puzzle structure, and immersion. The intermedial analysis investigates how narrative devices characteristic of physical escape rooms is reconfigured. Comparative analysis across the four titles then highlights design divergences.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

– Which narrative mechanisms characteristic of physical escape rooms are preserved, transformed, or lost in tabletop adaptations?

– How is narrative pacing—and its parallel, the pacing of puzzles—constructed within the limits of the board-game medium?

Together, they establish the conceptual bridge between the narrative logic of physical escape rooms and their tabletop reinterpretations. By addressing these issues, the project aims to examine whether the relationship between physical and tabletop escape rooms can be described in terms of intermedial transfer or adaptation, or whether tabletop escape-room games constitute a distinct medium that develops its own narrative structures and modes of engagement.

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