

The Conjunctive Voice of the Player in Escape Rooms: A Framework

Richard Sherriff

London College of Communication, University of the Arts London
Elephant and Castle, London, SE1 6SB
r.sherriff@lcc.arts.ac.uk

Milly Rose Gunn

School of Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW
m.gunn@gold.ac.uk

Keywords

Escape rooms, voice, live-action games, speech-act theory, linguistics

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper examines the player's voice in escape rooms as a discrete form of agency that can alter the conditions of play, affect tangible change in the ludic environment, and shape how a group of players collectively navigates a space. Voice in ludic environments has long been described as having a transformative force, bordering on the ritualistic or magical (Ghosh, 2011). Stingel-Voigt (2020) notes that vocalisations have "an impact on the virtual world and the figures acting within it," echoing Agrippa's assertion that the voice can influence both people and material things (Tyson, 1993). Bringing these perspectives into dialogue with physical ludic spaces, this investigation focuses on escape rooms as environments where speech is not only functional, but world-shaping.

While research has explored vocalicity in digital environments (Cheng, 2013; Tatlow, 2020), comparatively little attention has been given to voice in non-virtual, physically co-present ludic settings. Escape rooms offer a compelling site for such analysis, due to the significant reliance on speech as a navigational tool for players -- directing teammates, testing hypotheses aloud, negotiating interpretations, and sometimes interacting with staff or actors. How, when, and by whom speech is produced becomes central to how the play within the room unfolds. These dynamics are rarely neutral; the experience of using one's voice in a confined, themed, time-pressured environment can be shaped by confidence, familiarity with the genre, group

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

composition, and a range of social and sensory factors. Such conditions influence how players participate, what kinds of vocal expression feel available to them, and how their spoken contributions affect the play experience.

This research, and its respective developing framework, identifies four parties that influence the soundscape of escape rooms: The Game, Game Masters, Actors, and Players. Each plays a role in shaping how information circulates, and thereby, how the escape room plays out. The Game establishes constraints and affordances, such as how progression can be triggered by speech, what clues rely on listening, and how sound is integrated into puzzles. Game Masters intervene through instructions, hints, or narration, and Actors provide dramaturgical texture through scripted or improvised responses. Players, meanwhile, generate the majority of vocal activity: commands, questions, emotional reactions, moments of uncertainty or excitement.

The framework presented identifies the player's speech (Austin, 1955; Derrida, 1988) as the guiding force allowing players to progress through escape rooms. These speech acts, defined by Austin and Derrida as "performatives", are of a form distinct from other types of speech, in their ability to "accomplish something through the speech itself", and "produce or transform a situation" (Derrida, 1988, p.13). Utterances such as "try turning that," "we've solved this," or "I think the key goes here" do not simply describe actions—they possess the ability to prompt or enact them. Speech becomes part of the mechanism by which puzzles are solved, the game's world is shaped, and momentum is sustained. In some escape rooms, a specific spoken phrase may even act as a trigger that activates technology within the room, or prompts actors to respond, foregrounding how the room listens and responds to players.

Because escape rooms depend so heavily on communication, the pleasure of play often emerges through moments where voice facilitates coordination, discovery, or shared excitement. At the same time, the experience of speaking, and of being heard, can vary significantly among players. Group dynamics, social expectations, and differing comfort levels with improvisation or performative participation all subtly influence whose ideas are taken up, how freely individuals vocalise speculation, and how authority circulates. These factors shape the overall affective experience of the room, potentially fostering satisfaction and flow, or causing frustration or hesitation.

The framework developed in this study visualises the interactions between the four contributing parties and emphasises how performative speech drives the system upward from the player, through the structure of the game. The framework developed in this study visualises the interactions between the four contributing parties and emphasises how performative

speech can contribute to driving the game forward. Player's spoken contributions ripple throughout the game, influencing design components, actor responses, and the pacing of play. Rather than treating vocality as secondary to the visual or material aspects of escape rooms, we position it as central to how these spaces operate, how players make sense of them, and how the game plays out.

By focusing on these seemingly conjurative qualities of voice and mapping the interplay between different contributors to the escape room soundscape, this research aims to extend current understandings of non-digital ludic environments. It highlights how speech mediates collaboration, world-building, and progression, and how the experience of using one's voice in these settings can be shaped by a range of perceptual and embodied factors. More broadly, this framework offers a way to think about how designers might craft escape rooms that respond to the different voices within them, supporting more dynamic forms of participatory play.

REFERENCES

Agrippa, H.C., 1993. Three Books of Occult Philosophy written by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (J. Freake, Trans., D. Tyson, Ed. & Ann.). *St. Paul: Llewellyn.* (First Latin ed., 1531.

Austin, J.L., 1975. *How to do things with words* (Vol. 88). Oxford University Press.

Binet, L., 2015. The Seventh Function of Language. Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle

Cheng, W., 2013. Acoustemologies of the Closet. In *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality* (p. 337). Oxford University Press.

Derrida, J., 1988. "Signature Event Context" in *Limited Inc.* Northwestern University Press.

Ghosh, M., 2011. Rituals and Performatives in *Philosophical Papers* (8), pp.25-30. University of North Bengal.

Stingel-Voigt, Y., 2020. Functions and Meanings of Vocal Sound in Video Games. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, 1(2), pp.25-43.

Tatlow, S., 2020. Everyone in Space Wants to Hear You Scream: Toward a Framework for Understanding Player Voice in Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, 1(3), pp.15-34.