

Diegetic Pleasure: Multimodal Immersion and Emotional Engagement in Escape Rooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how designers of escape rooms employ diegetic construction and multimodal strategies to create immersive, emotionally engaging experiences that elicit diverse forms of pleasure and affective involvement. Although escape rooms rely on physical environments that might appear naturally conducive to immersion, establishing a coherent and emotionally engaging world proves considerably more complex. The process of diegetization—integrating narrative, spatial design, and interactive elements into a unified fictional framework—plays a central role in shaping immersion and contributes to the formation of memorable game (Stasiak 2025) and one-off experiences characteristic of contemporary escape rooms.

Since their emergence in the late 2000s, escape rooms have drawn extensively on design principles developed within digital games, particularly point-and-click adventures, whose logic of environmental interaction and spatial puzzle sequencing has significantly shaped the format (Nicholson 2015). Games more broadly constitute a well-established domain for studying affect, emotion and player experience, with research in game studies demonstrating how digital play can elicit, model and respond to complex emotional states (ex. Karpouzis & Yannakakis 2016). Work on affective gaming emphasises that games depend not only on mechanical structure or visual realism but also on affective realism and emotional responsiveness, which enhance engagement and experiential depth (Gilleade, Dix & Allanson 2005; Hudlicka 2009). These insights are crucial when considering escape rooms, which translate digital conventions of emotional and affective engagement into physical environments and rely on embodied, multisensory interaction to produce heightened experiential intensity.

Within this context, immersion becomes a foundational concept. Rather than a simple sense of absorption, immersion can be understood as a layered experiential state shaped by narrative coherence, sensory alignment, player expectations and the perceived stability of the fictional world (Murray 1997; Ryan 2001). When transferred

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from digital media to physical space, these conditions become more demanding: inconsistencies or non-diegetic elements can disrupt the experiential frame more immediately than in virtual environments – as the effect of „film set shock” (McMahan 2003). This is where diegesis—rooted in narratology as the organisation and coherence of the represented world (Genette 1980) —becomes central for escape

room design. Although later adapted for the study of interactive media (Galloway 2006), its broader theoretical lineage underscores its relevance for any medium that seeks to sustain a consistent representational space. Applying the concept to escape rooms foregrounds the challenge of constructing a world that must hold together materially, narratively and affectively in real time.

Diegesis in escape rooms is grounded in a design process that prioritizes elements integral to the fictional world. When all components align, the room gains experiential realism, and players more readily suspend disbelief (Kirkpatrick 2004), not only cognitively but also affectively, responding with emotions that feel anchored in the world (Calleja 2011). The affective dimension becomes especially significant when diegetic integration encompasses multimodal sensory design. Multimodality amplifies emotional impact by engaging multiple channels of perception simultaneously (Gerdes et.al. 2014), enabling designers to pre-configure emotional responses through coordinated sensory cues. Scents, temperature shifts, soundscapes and tactile textures can elicit visceral reactions that deepen affective involvement (Norman 2003). A warm cookie or cinnamon smell can evoke domestic comfort, while metallic, dusty or mouldy scents strengthen fear or unease in horror settings. When these modalities remain diegetically coherent—matching the narrative, environment and mechanics—they strengthen emotional realism and intensify player engagement (Boston & Tingoy 2016), producing feelings that are embodied rather than merely imagined.

The study analyses 10 Polish escape rooms included in the Top Escape Rooms Project Enthusiasts’ Choice Award (TERPECA) rankings between 2023–2025, selected to represent different thematic genres (horror, adventure, science fiction) and varying multimodal design strategies. Data derives from repeated play sessions conducted by the researcher and supplemented by field notes documenting group interactions and sensory-affective reactions. Due to the inherent constraints of the medium - particularly the one-time nature of the experience and the difficulty of obtaining detailed production materials from designers - the study adopts a descriptive, reconstructive approach based on participatory autoethnography and participant observation. Specific rooms are not identified, both for ethical reasons and to preserve the integrity of gameplay, and the analysis instead focuses on broader ludic structures, strategies of diegetic integration, and sensory- affective mechanisms observable across these experiences. Because the study relies partly on autoethnographic experience, reflexive attention is given to researcher positionality, prior genre familiarity, and expectations shaping immersion.

This study therefore examines how multimodal realism and the diegesis of design practices shape emotional responses, diverse forms of pleasure, and the feeling of presence within realistic space, highlighting how sensory, narrative, and affective elements contribute to intersectional pleasures in gameplay experiences. The following research questions will guide the analysis:

- How do diegetic cohesion and multimodal realism contribute to affective involvement in escape rooms?
- How can the interplay of multimodality, digitization, and affect extend current theoretical discussions on emotional design and sensory affordances across media?

Taken together, these questions position escape rooms as a unique site for investigating how sensory coherence, narrative alignment, and technologically mediated design choices produce intensified affective engagement. By examining escape rooms as hybrid environments, the study contributes to broader discussions in game studies concerning immersion beyond digital media and the role of sensory coherence in experiential game design.

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