

Biography

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The Mysterious Affair at Squire: Using Code-Breaking Games to Deliver Law Library Skills

Abstract: The Squire Law Library has designed and run a series of popular escape room-style events, aimed at masters and undergraduate law students. Intended to prompt students to explore the full range of legal resources available to them, the games typically challenge participants to open a locked safe: relying on legal databases, the library catalogue and print materials to decipher a six-digit combination. This article, based on Lizz Edwards-Waller's presentation at the BIALL (virtual) conference 2020, reflects on the practicalities of running and promoting code-breaking events within the library and considers the benefits of this style of event in addition to, or instead of, more traditional law library orientation tours.

Keywords: escape room; legal resources; student orientation; academic law libraries

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

The Squire Law Library is part of Cambridge University Libraries, and supports the teaching and research activities of the Faculty of Law. The library is embedded within the Faculty, occupying the top three floors of the David Williams Building, and is home to one of the largest academic legal collections in the UK.

As part of its role, the library provides electronic and print resources and study facilities for nearly 900 law students. These include students studying on the BA Tripos Degree, Master of Law (LLM), Masters in Corporate Law

(MCL) and Doctorate in Law (PhD) programmes. In any given academic year, around 46% of law students will be new and, as a result, student orientation tours and library welcome events play an important part in the library's calendar.

In a typical year (2020–2021 being the exception), the Librarian gives presentations to students as part of their introductory lectures and groups of students are welcomed to the library for in-person orientation tours. These activities take place directly before term starts and throughout the first week of term. The library would expect to run around 40 tours during this period, with each tour involving between 5 and 20 students. In

October 2020, a similar programme of welcome events took place via video, complimented by a virtual tour of the library and a live streamed question and answer session.

WHY RUN AN ESCAPE ROOM STYLE EVENT?

The popularity of escape rooms

There has been an explosion of interest in escape rooms and code-breaking games in recent years. Simon Osborne, writing in *The Guardian*¹, notes that there are now almost 1500 escape rooms in the UK, representing a rapid growth since the first one opened in 2012. There are several commercially operated escape rooms in Cambridge and venues within the University, such as the University Library and Cambridge University Museums² have run live action adventure games and escape rooms for visitors.

We felt that this type of game could support the library's objective of providing a timely and effective introduction to the electronic and print law collections available to students, and would be a fun addition to the existing repertoire of activities.

Reaching new students

Whilst most students attend introductory lectures and library orientation tours, not all do. Furthermore, these take place at the outset of term which can be a busy and disorientating time. Most students will be familiarising themselves with a new city, moving in to new accommodation and meeting new friends – in addition to undertaking their first steps in a rigorous academic programme. It is therefore not surprising that optional library orientations sometimes fall to the bottom of a student's 'to do' list!

Scheduled towards the end of the first term, the escape room style events provided an opportunity to connect with students who had not taken part in the initial welcome tours; whilst providing an additional activity – distinct from those offered at the outset of term – for those who had.

Building on an existing interest

Some members of the Squire Law Library staff team had engaged with escape rooms in commercial settings or had taken part in code-breaking activities hosted by the University for festivals and outreach events. Having a keen interest in escape rooms and puzzles provided insight when it came to writing a plot and creating the props needed. However, it also meant that we really enjoyed this format of event. I think it's important to emphasise that these activities are meant to be fun – not only for the student participants, but for the library team involved in organising them as well!

CREATING THE PUZZLES

The escape room game we designed was called *The Courtroom Conundrum*. This initially ran in November 2018 and was repeated, for a new cohort of students, in December 2019. In planning the game we started by identifying the resources we wanted to highlight and the learning outcomes we wanted students to achieve. These were broadly organised around three themes, all of which are included in our initial orientation tours:

- Increasing familiarity with the library catalogue, iDiscover, for searching both print and electronic resources
- Highlighting the availability of legal databases for searching case law
- Developing an understanding of the layout of the library by subject area

We developed two puzzles around each of these themes, which would require students to use library resources – and some lateral thinking – to solve! We then added a fourth theme: general puzzles, which did not require the use of any library resources but were a fun addition to the game.

Two example puzzles are included below. These were all provided for participants within the room: either displayed on arrival, or hidden in cases and boxes which were opened during the course of the game play.

Recommended Reading		
If:		
J.qf.9.K.3	=	7
D.9.D.24	=	2
J.nt.9.M.11	=	1
Then:		
H.q.9.B.4	=	?

Figure 1: Example Puzzle: increasing familiarity with the library catalogue and the classification scheme.

This puzzle was included on a poster board within the room. The codes refer to classmarks of print books held within the Squire Law Library collections. Participants needed to search for the first three on the library catalogue to find the corresponding title. They could then deduce that the number next to each classmark refers to the number of words in the book title. Searching for the

final classmark would reveal that this relates to the book *Exploring Private Law* edited by Elise Bant and Matthew Harding (Cambridge University Press, 2010). This has three words in the title and so 3 is the solution.

Example Puzzle: General puzzle

This puzzle was hidden in an envelope within the room. A map of the UK and ball of string was provided separately. Participants needed to search for the relevant cities on the map and plot a course between them 'as the crow flies' using the string. When completed, the string will form a number 4 on the map and so 4 is the solution.

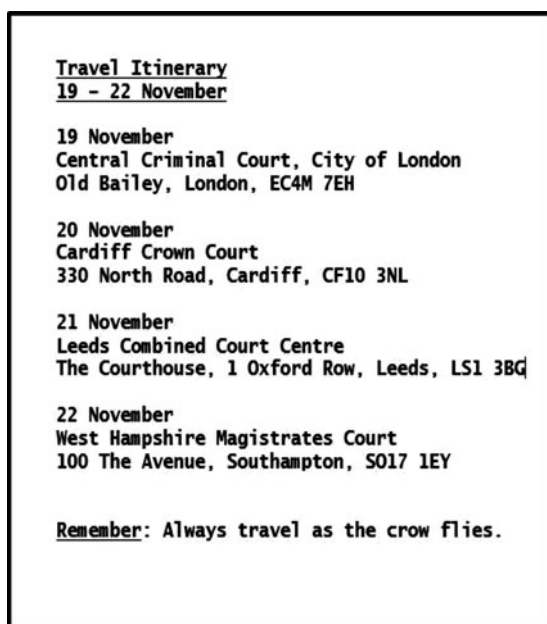


Figure 2: Example Puzzle: General Puzzle.

Devising the plot

After the puzzles had been created and relevant props acquired, we established a light-hearted plot to link them together. This was based around a fictional firm, Squire Law Chambers, where a set of court documents had been locked in a safe and no one could remember the combination! Groups were challenged to solve six puzzles (some of which had more than one element), each of which led to a single digit number. Once all six puzzles had been solved, groups would have a six digit combination to open the safe.

Whilst we did develop some theming around the game (e.g. creating signage for Squire Law Chambers, and organising the room to look like an office), this was secondary to the puzzles themselves.

MEANS, MOTIVE AND OPPORTUNITY: RUNNING THE GAMES

Space requirements

We used a multi-purpose seminar room, within the library area, to host the escape game. We felt it was

important to hold the activity on-site so as to associate the escape room plot, and the resources it highlighted, with the library itself. We did have to be mindful of the impact on other library users; for example, some puzzles within the game involved participants racing to find a specific book or shouting instructions to each other. It was therefore very helpful to have a self-contained space, distinct from the quiet study areas of the library, to use.

When using a room which has not been specifically designed or adapted for an escape game it's important to clearly identify at the outset of the game which elements are 'in play' and which are not. For example, the seminar room housed several PCs which were not used in the game but could not be removed. We carefully instructed participants that these were 'out of bounds' – as were the fire alarm and security panels!

Props

The props used for an escape game may largely be determined by the budget available and the flexibility of the space being used. Instead of buying props for this activity, we borrowed or re-purposed items from around the library: these included a clock, map, desk fan, petty cash tin, waste paper basket, files, and – of course – books! We also borrowed a number of items with combination locks, such as a briefcase, bike lock and portable safe.

As we were using a multi-purpose seminar room which was regularly in use for teaching as well, all props had to be portable: thereby ensuring they could be quickly set up and later removed from the room each day. We found it very helpful to develop a quick reference sheet detailing which items should be placed where in the room, and what the relevant lock combinations were, so that the room could be efficiently re-set between games.

Technology

The game was fully interactive, requiring participants to search a number of online databases to find citations or case names. One of the main aims of the escape room activity was to introduce – or build familiarity with – these resources. We suggested in advance that participants bring their own devices (e.g. laptops or phones) to use within the game, as we felt this would mirror their experience of using the databases for study purposes. We did, however, provide an additional PC within the room and several teams opted to use this instead of – or in addition to – their own devices.

Timing

In planning the escape room, timing is a key consideration for both participants and organisers. The activity itself is timed for participants, with groups competing to see whether they can decipher the six digit safe combination within a set time frame. A countdown clock was projected on a wall in the room to keep track of time and

add to the tension! The time allowance needs to be sufficiently challenging to make the game exciting but generous enough to ensure that the task is manageable by some – if not most - groups. We initially set a limit of 30 minutes as this is directly comparable to the time taken for an orientation tour of the library. However, in later versions of the game we increased the allowance to 40 minutes, as further discussed in the Lessons Learned section of this article.

In addition to the time taken to play the escape game, organisers need to leave time between games to brief incoming participants and to re-set the room afterwards. We scheduled a 10 minute staff-led introduction before each game, and 20 minutes afterwards to re-set the room and replace single use items (e.g. maps that were drawn on). We could therefore accommodate one game per hour, and ran three hour sessions at a time.

Number of participants

Similar to the time allowance, the number of participants in each team is a key variable in determining whether or not a group successfully deciphers the code. Like most commercial escape rooms, we recommended a group size of between 2–8 participants thereby ensuring there were enough people to complete the tasks within the time frame, but not too many that communication and co-ordination became difficult.

We were mindful that in limiting the number of participants to 8 per group, this activity had a much lower capacity than a welcome lecture or orientation tour.

Ticketing and reservations

We used a free ticketing website to manage bookings for the escape room and details were circulated to all current law students via a Faculty e-mail list. In both November 2018 and December 2019 the available time slots were fully booked within a few hours of being advertised.

With a limited number of games available, we sent reminder e-mails to all participants in advance to ensure groups turned up. We also managed a waiting list for groups that had been unable to book a slot, detailing future opportunities to take part.

LESSONS LEARNED

Ensuring a positive experience

We had always intended that the escape rooms would be a fun experience for student participants, as well as a learning opportunity. We therefore wanted groups to leave the library feeling as if they had been successful in completing – or almost completing - the code breaking challenge. However, in the first run of games it became apparent that a 30 minute time allowance was too short

for most teams to uncover and solve all the puzzles, especially when working in a smaller team of 2 or 3 students. Some teams asked for additional time to keep trying and we felt that key learning opportunities were being missed if students didn't have the opportunity to try and solve all of the puzzles.

When re-running the game in December 2019, we decided to increase the time allowance to 40 minutes. We also introduced the character of 'legal librarian' to the plot: a member of the Squire Law Library team who would sit in the room and could provide up to 3 hints on request. These two modifications, ensured that over 80% of teams successfully completed the game and all teams had the opportunity to try all of the puzzles.

A starting point for further communication

We were unable to meet demand for the escape rooms in both November 2018 and December 2019, and all games were fully booked. This led us to consider other ways of involving students in the activity: for example, by sharing team photos and example puzzles on social media and setting up an e-mail newsletter which students could subscribe to for details of future games. Through these initiatives we engaged with a wider number of students than those actually taking part in the games and developed lasting channels of communication.

We sent a follow-up e-mail to student participants, with a copy of their team photo, after each escape game and received very positive comments in response. However, we didn't carry out any longer term studies to explore whether participation in the escape rooms correlates with greater use of library resources or facilities.

Comparisons with library orientation tours

The Courtroom Conundrum proved to be a popular addition to the library's activities. The 'gamification' of themes from our existing orientation tours provided an opportunity to present these in a different way – both for new and returning students.

The time involved in the initial creation of puzzles and acquisition of props is substantially higher than that which would be needed for a traditional orientation tour. As such, we felt that it was worth repeating the same escape room for students on multiple occasions. Staff time in running the games should also be factored in to planning for these activities.

We have since developed a second escape room plot and puzzles for future use and continue to explore the possibility of providing a virtual alternative for students in the 2020–2021 academic year.

Footnotes

¹ Simon Osborne, 'Get me out of here! Why escape rooms have become a global craze', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/apr/01/get-out-how-escape-rooms-became-a-global-craze>

² Ina Pruegel, 'Cambridge Codebreakers: Developing a Codebreaking Adventure Across 4 Museums', University of Cambridge Museums & Botanic Garden Collections In Action blog: <https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2018/03/02/cambridge-codebreakers-developing-a-codebreaking-adventure-across-4-museums/>

Biography

Lizz Edwards-Waller is a library assistant at the Squire Law Library, where she has worked since 2017, providing support and resources for students on the LLM and MCL course programmes. Prior to joining the Squire Law Library, Lizz completed a Graduate Traineeship at the University of Essex - Albert Sloman Library and worked for several years as a member of the Reader Services team at Cambridge University Library.

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Using Lego[®] Serious Play[®] in Higher Education with Law Students: Encouraging Playfulness and Creativity within Library Workshops

Abstract: The following article began life as a ten-minute presentation titled 'Building student engagement brick by brick; using Lego[®] Serious Play[®] to explore subject engagement in HE', presented at BIALL's 2020 virtual conference on 12 June 2020. Since 2016 I have been incorporating Lego[®] Serious Play[®] (LSP) within my practice as an academic librarian at Middlesex University. This article will explore how I have embedded LSP into workshops with students and staff, the tactics employed to gain acceptance for using LSP within academic settings and offering some tentative predictions on whether playful approaches will be successful in the current Higher Education (HE) landscape, dominated as we currently are by virtual learning and screen technologies.

Keywords: universities; law students; legal research skills

A history of Lego[®] Serious Play[®] (LSP) will offer some insights as to how the approach came to be, alongside a personal account of what this could mean for more traditional approaches to academic librarianship and student learning.

HOW DO YOU FANCY A DAY IN CAMBRIDGE?

In 2016 I had been working at Middlesex University for less than 6 months when my line manager drew my