

Novice to leader: My beginner journey to designing escape rooms

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ABSTRACT

Playful learning practices are recognised in higher education as they align with active learning pedagogies. They promote innovation and leadership that influence and inspire educators. An escape room is one such playful learning practice. Among educators, it is commonly identified as a game that is designed mostly by experts. However, this paper presents work by a learning designer with no prior knowledge of designing escape rooms, yet is an enthusiastic learner who wants to inspire the higher education community. The work reflects on the design journey acquired from novice to leader level. Three escape rooms were designed to reflect on the experience. Two of the escape rooms were digital, and the other was in physical space. The paper interprets the experiences and informal feedback from colleagues captured during the design and facilitation of these escape rooms. The reflections indicated that taking the initiative to design and facilitate escape rooms promoted playful learning pedagogy and leadership. Distributed and transformational leadership were visible throughout the journey. This work is situated within educational escape rooms, playful learning and leadership theories. The findings highlighted that the foundation of leadership in playful innovations is being transparent about experiences gained along the journey and encouraging other educators to start with smaller and simple steps. In this way, the community can be inspired to recognise that playful pedagogical innovations are not limited to experts and experienced educators. This inspiration brings the community together, opening avenues for collaboration and co-creation to promote them as leaders in the innovative learning design process. Even though the findings cannot be generalised across all contexts, the paper shares the experience of a novice designer of escape rooms in building community knowledge through pedagogical innovation and leadership.

Keywords: educational leadership, playful learning, pedagogical innovations, educational escape rooms

Introduction

Higher education promotes innovative pedagogical approaches, and playful learning is one of them. Playful learning is an approach that allows learners to achieve their learning outcomes while participating actively and playfully (Li & Kangas, 2024). Playful learning strategies have become popular in higher education as they promote innovation, engagement and deeper learning (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Game-based learning and gamification are two concepts that fall within the broader concept of playful learning. Educational escape rooms can be positioned within game-based learning, as they are team-based games in which participants solve puzzles and complete structured challenges to achieve a defined goal (Nicholson, 2018).

Educational escape rooms are considered a useful approach to promote active learning (Makri et al., 2021). However, there is concern among educators that designing educational escape rooms can be difficult due to a lack of experience (Fotaris & Mastoras, 2022; Repetto et al., 2023) or even workload issues (Nørgård et al., 2017).

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This article shares my experience designing educational escape rooms in digital and physical environments. It was a journey from novice to leader, as I had no prior experience designing escape rooms, either in the physical or digital space. However, as a Community of Practice (CoP) co-facilitator for the 'Fun and Games' CoP of the University, I took the playful initiative to design escape rooms using university-supported digital tools to encourage and inspire staff. Such playful leadership happens when one experiments with new tasks and is willing to explore new avenues to inspire others (Quinsee & Parker, 2024).

I designed three types of escape rooms (two digital and one physical), using tools such as Xerte (The Xerte Project, 2024) and Blackboard Ultra (Anthology Inc., 2025), as they are commonly used at the University for teaching and learning purposes. Through this, I took the initiative to promote the design of educational escape rooms. This shaped my confidence and leadership in inspiring staff to engage in playful learning. Not only that but taking the initiative has built me up as a leader who “walks the talk” (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 18). The paper aims to:

- Identify the role of the leadership involved throughout the escape room design journey; and
- Share experiences for educators who are interested in being leaders in playful learning.

This paper explains the design of three escape rooms where it does not focus on digital tools used for the designs. Rather, it presents how designing the escape rooms built leadership while looking through a pedagogical lens. This work reflects on the journey from novice to confident practitioner, providing practice insights for educators to influence the community to adopt similar game-based approaches in their own contexts.

Background

Playful learning in higher education promotes motivation, and fosters engagement and active learning (Whitton, 2018). This aligns with experiential learning and constructivist theories, which hold that learning is built through interactive engagement and hands-on experience (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Playful learning promotes learning by doing and critical thinking. Gamification and game-based learning fall under the playful learning umbrella. Deterding et al (2011) defines gamification as the “use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (p. 10). These game elements include points, badges, and leaderboards that are targeted to enhance player motivation (Nicholson, 2015). In contrast, in game-based learning, games are designed or existing games are used to achieve learning objectives so that the learning process is embedded in the gameplay (Plass et al., 2015). Nicholson and Cable (2021) position escape rooms as a type of game-based learning method where a narrative, puzzles and learning outcomes are interconnected. Their work informed this study around how the escape rooms need to be designed for educational purposes instead of simply focusing on entertainment. The work presented in this paper is about educational escape rooms (just one form of game-based learning) situated within the broader concept of playful learning.

Educational escape rooms provide an engaging, collaborative learning space compared to traditional learning activities (Makri et al., 2021; Veldkamp et al., 2020), with opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and experiential learning. Escape rooms can be designed in physical or digital spaces. In the digital space, with limited resources, an escape room can be designed. Further, it is flexible and persistent, where players can use it when necessary (Makri et al., 2021). It is important to align the game's puzzles or quests with the learning outcomes to ensure they guide learners in acquiring knowledge (Veldkamp et al., 2020). Escape room design comprises a narrative, puzzles, game elements, and feedback.

This makes learning active and affords the opportunity to construct knowledge through learning by doing (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Therefore, when designing escape rooms, it is important to plan them thoroughly in order for learners to acquire and apply knowledge through active engagement, trial and error, and problem solving. When using digital tools to design the escape room, promoting University supported tools is beneficial, as staff rely on existing infrastructure. Further, training staff or students to use these tools does not incur additional cost, since the university has already taken measures to provide the necessary training and support (Aguirre-Acosta & Espínola-Carballo, 2022).

When promoting playful learning, my personal experience indicates that leading through action is more useful than sharing information on what can be done. Especially as a co-facilitator of the 'Fun and Games' CoP, being a role model and practicing what you preach is the best way to be a leader who inspires others. Sharing experiences can help the community understand how to adopt the practice in their context and foster enthusiasm to try new things (Bracken & Riley, 2025). Leadership also inspires others to try new methods. Although studies have focused on students' experiences of working in educational escape rooms, there is a gap in educators' experiences and in their leadership roles in designing them (Makri et al., 2021).

To innovate or inspire the community, going beyond the comfort zone and accepting the challenge is important. Playful leadership shows these characteristics (Whitton & Moseley, 2025). Therefore, risk-taking is important when educators take a leadership role in innovations. Taking a self-directed learning approach in planning playful learning activities develops a leader who takes risks. Self-directed learning can build confidence and learning from mistakes, which can influence a community and its development.

The work presented in this article is grounded in game-based learning which is under the umbrella of playful learning and leadership through practice and is framed within the interpretivist paradigm through my reflective narrative. Even though the work presented in this article does not follow formal data analysis, it indicates personal experience in adopting new educational practices and personal growth while planting seeds among fellow educators around new practices (Quinsee & Parker, 2024; Schrier et al., 2023). This approach guided me to share how I lead pedagogical innovation to promote playful learning. Therefore, this article aims to inspire the wider community to become playful leaders who accept challenges, embrace creativity, and experiment in their practice.

Methodology

The work is framed as a reflective narrative in which I reflect on my experiences in designing escape rooms. The activities described in this work were designed in a UK higher education environment with the digital tools supported by the institution. Thus, I used Xerte and Blackboard Ultra. When designing these escape rooms, I had no prior experience. Since last year, co-facilitating the Fun and Games CoP, prompted the idea to plan new practices to bring to the group. My journey into escape room design began by acquiring my required knowledge through webinars, conferences, and reading materials. However, when starting the Senior Fellowship application, I wanted to step back to understand what my 'Golden thread' (Keane, 2023) is. That is, to influence, empower and develop digital capabilities of educators which align with a leadership role in education. Through this work, I can be a playful leader who motivates others to use escape rooms in their practice. This work spans 13 months (June 2024 to September 2025) and includes designing three educational escape rooms. Each escape room caters for a different purpose, which I explain in the next section.

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The design process was iterative, with feedback from colleagues to finalise the product. The data used in this work comprises reflective experiences in designing the escape rooms, such as technical barriers, designing puzzles, using appropriate interactive tools and writing compelling narratives, and informal feedback from colleagues, such as coffee catchups, reactions during meetings, and critical friend comments on game content. However, I do not use quotes that directly identify commenters and highlight only my own reflections and actions that influenced my work.

This work did not follow formal ethics protocols, as there was no formal procedure for data collection, such as interviews or questionnaires (McGinn, 2018). The primary focus of this work was pedagogical innovation. Therefore, this work aligns with self-reflective practice, in which I interpret my role as a leader in the design process. As a result, this work has limitations, such as reflections based solely on my interpretation and on informal feedback from colleagues. However, the target of this work is not to generalise my experience across all contexts but to facilitate educators to reflect on whether they are in a similar or different stance in relation to their experiences and what my experiences might mean to them in their leadership role in education and game-based learning.

Designing escape rooms

This section presents the development of three educational escape rooms and aims to focus on the decisions behind the design approaches such as narrative, structure of the puzzles and expected goals to be achieved.

Two of the activities (Figures 1 and 2) are designed as digital escape rooms since they are fully screen-based. The third escape room (Figure 3) designed in the physical space involves tangible and spatial interactions. The two approaches (digital and physical) are targeted to help the educators understand how the escape rooms can be designed for different learning experiences. Whether the escape room was designed in digital or physical spaces, I followed the same design principles (including use of narrative and puzzles to progress). However, the pedagogical affordances of both spaces are different. Digital space gives more flexibility, persistency, safety and ability to engage at one's own pace. Conversely, physical escape rooms require real-time interactions, collaboration, and spatial awareness. In this work, the escape room designed in the physical space was combined with an activity structured in the immersive environment. This highlights that choice of environment not only influences the design but also, learner engagement.

Xerte escape room – Escape the museum (Figure 1)

The purpose of this escape room was to introduce and highlight the interactive functions of Xerte that are appropriate for designing and running an escape room. This example provides an instructional design guide for educators to understand what interactive functions in Xerte are useful for designing quests and puzzles. Therefore, the intended audience is academic staff, learning technologists, learning designers and other colleagues in learning technology.

This Xerte-based resource can be repurposed by anyone interested in using escape rooms in their context but unsure how to start. Reusing is common in e-learning content design, making content design easier and more flexible (Wills & Pegler, 2016).

The story in this game was about finding a lost artefact to escape the museum. This narrative gives learners the goal and context. I used interactive elements such as Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs),

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drag-and-drop, matching items, and hotspots activities, in Xerte to design the quest. These interactions illustrate how learners can engage with the content actively and solve the puzzles to navigate through the game (Nicholson, 2015). At present, most of the staff are aware of these functions and use them to design online content in Xerte. Creating an escape room in Xerte, I wanted to demystify the idea that designing is a time-consuming or complex task. I used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to develop the storyline and images. In finalising the game, this approach was useful to write the storyline and design the images for the escape room game.

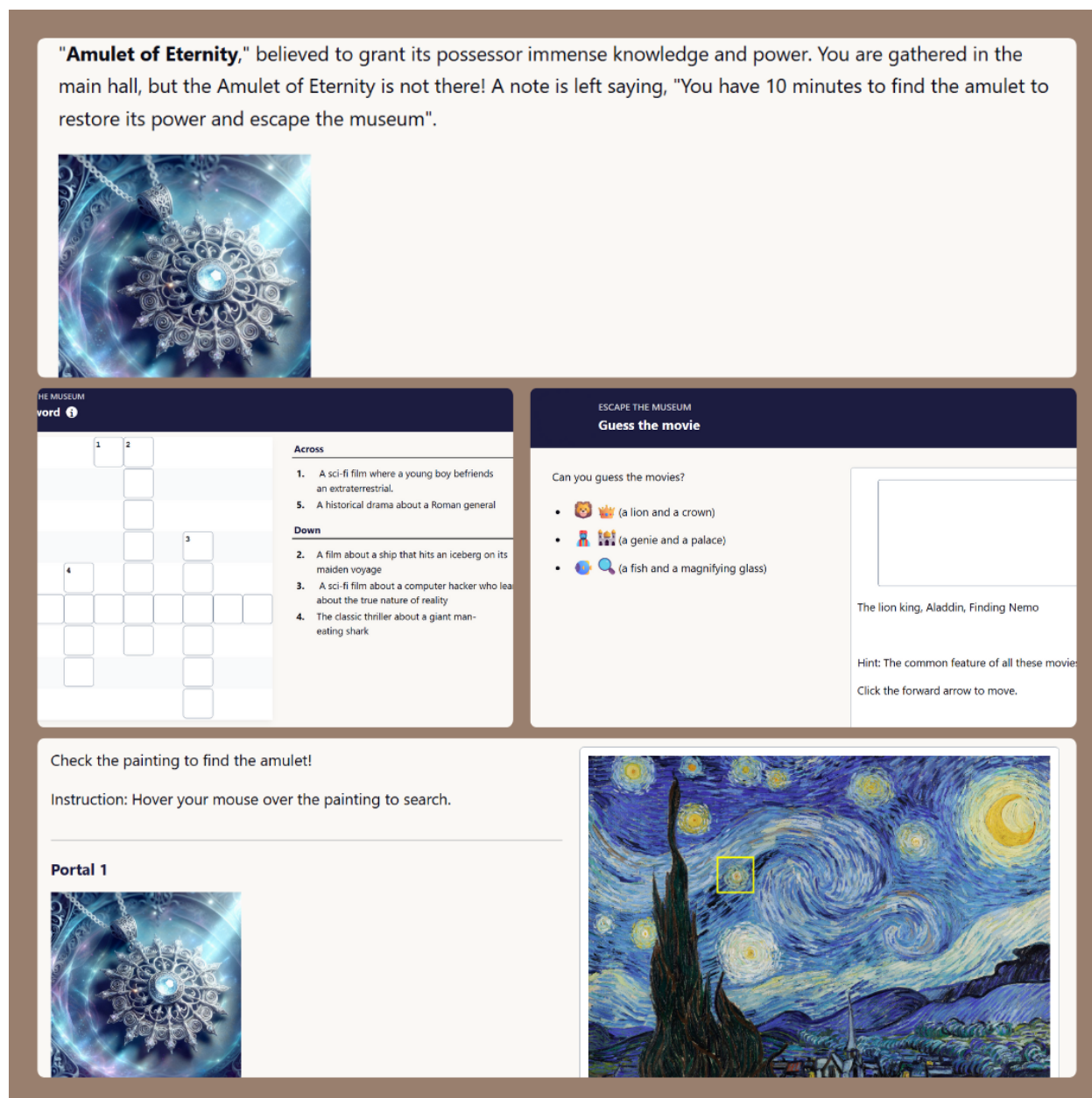


Figure 1 Screenshots of different pages of the escape room designed in Xerte

Blackboard Ultra escape room – Escape the Learning Central Labyrinth (Figure 2)

The purpose of this escape room was to introduce students to Blackboard Ultra. Blackboard Ultra is the Learning Management System (LMS) used by the University. During the first-year students' induction week,

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the University shares resources and guides on using the LMS. Additionally, a live demo looking at navigation of the LMS is provided. Student surveys conducted by the University's Digital Education team indicated that students found it difficult to digest all this information during their first week of induction. Some comments suggested introducing a more active method, such as a game-based activity, to learn how to use the LMS. This inspired me to design an escape room to introduce students to using the LMS. The initial idea was to reuse the above Xerte and repurpose it to add quests related to Blackboard Ultra. However, the concern was that this did not allow students to gain hands-on experience with the Blackboard Ultra features. Since this game-based activity was for the Digital Education team to use in the student induction programme, I consulted them to gather their requirements. They insisted that students should complete tasks to navigate through online content, engage in discussions, and upload assessments. Considering these, rather than answering questions about LMS features, designing the activity in Blackboard Ultra was the best approach in order for students to practice on the platform. The storyline for the escape room was that students must navigate through the online content and complete the puzzles to find the way out of the LMS labyrinth. Some of the quests were:

- Locating a file that contains clues;
- Submit a dummy assessment to unlock the next clue;
- Discuss with peers to figure out the password to unlock the next clue; and
- Complete quizzes and tests.

The escape room supports students in gaining hands-on experience navigating the LMS and using it appropriately during their learning journey. The above actions create different puzzle structures that learners can engage with, enabling them to progress by completing the challenges. This arrangement of puzzles creates a sequence (Nicholson, 2015) through which learners navigate the game using clues or keys to advance. After completing this activity, students receive a certificate generated by Power Automate (Microsoft, n.d). This certificate can be used as a digital badge to demonstrate their confident use of the LMS.

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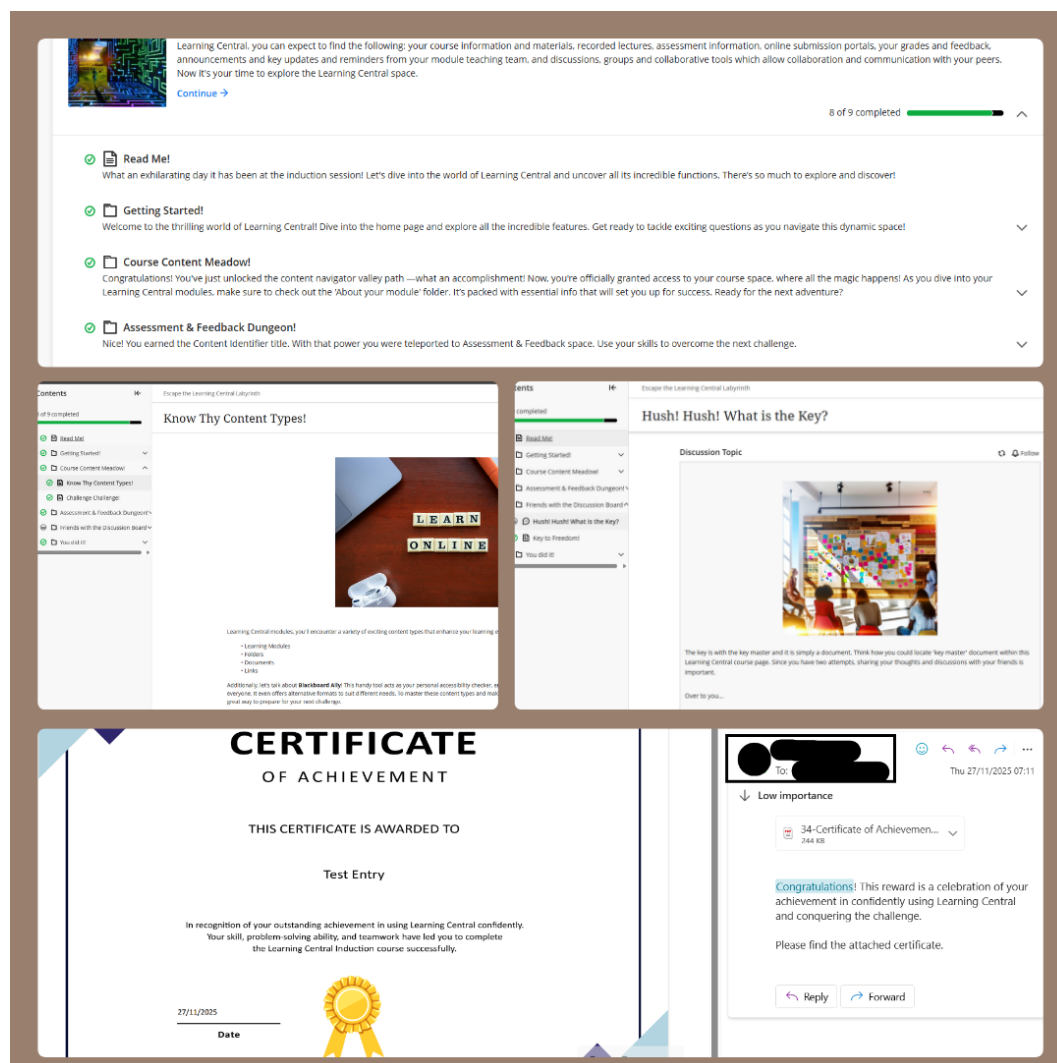


Figure 2 Screenshots of different sections of the escape room designed in Blackboard Ultra

Immersive environment escape room – Princess Pear-doggy Quest (Figure 3)

The purpose of this escape room was to inspire staff to design a simple escape room in the physical space and link it to the immersive environment activity. This activity also highlights how to use existing resources in day-to-day life and game elements to create puzzles and quests. In the immersive space, participants walk through a forest to complete a playful learning quest. The immersive space was designed by the university immersive learning team. In one scene, a passcode is set to move to the next scene. However, the designers of the immersive activity needed support to set clues to help participants derive the passcode. One colleague suggested designing a simple escape room-style activity in the physical space and asked if I could co-lead this with them. Solving the puzzles in that activity can guide the participants to derive the passcode. I used simple techniques such as mathematical problem-solving, a jigsaw puzzle and decoding a cryptic message to design the quest. These puzzles were a cornerstone for building collaborative problem solving and helping learners understand how to apply the clues to progress (Nicholson & Cable, 2021). In the physical space, learners moved around and engaged in discussions with peers showing their immersion in the game. This was a good example of creating an escape room with limited resources and incorporating it with immersive learning activity.



Figure 3 Screenshots of escape room quests designed in the physical space

The above examples illustrate how escape rooms can be designed in digital and physical contexts to support different forms of engagement for learners. Based on the experience I gained through designing them, there are key design principles that are applicable and useful for anyone designing escape rooms. They are:

- **Narrative** – This is the key which gives the purpose and motivation for completing the activity. The three escape rooms, I explained above, had their own narrative (escaping museum, escaping LMS labyrinth etc.). They create the purpose for the learner to engage and gives them a goal to be motivated.
- **Aligning with learning outcomes** – Playfulness and fun are not the only expectation of the activity to be designed as an escape room. It needs to ensure that the puzzles and learning outcomes are aligned allowing learners to construct and apply knowledge. In the Blackboard Ultra escape room, the puzzles were directly linked with the task learners would need to use the LMS confidently.

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- Puzzles design – Puzzles play a key part as they are important to build the sequence through clues to progress towards the goal while creating opportunities for the learners to achieve the learning outcomes.
- Other design factors – When I was designing, I thought about factors such as using different types of puzzles to prevent any boredom or monotony. This also helped to sequence the puzzles with both simple and complex tasks. Further, I took steps to maintain content accessibility and ensured that the game could be reused by the staff to explore the underlying design principles.
- Iterative design process – Using an iterative design process was useful for me as I was able to get feedback from colleagues and refine the functions to perform without failure.

Findings

Based on my reflections, three themes emerged. They are:

- Building up the personal journey from novice to leader;
- Building up community with knowledge sharing; and
- Demystifying the complexity of designing an escape room.

Building up the personal journey from novice to leader

My ability to design an escape room was not at a high level compared to the eagerness I had to develop one. I was a novice last year. However, I am an influencer now, and colleagues refer to me as “the escape room person”. My colleagues’ feedback was on the functionality and the logic of the game design. Most of the suggestions were to simplify the quests to make them more inclusive for anyone who uses them. Inclusion is important in the education context (Tomlinson, 2014); changing the quests by removing anything that links to a specific context, or updating them with detailed hints and feedback to solve the puzzle. Since I am not a Xerte expert, I requested feedback from colleagues who are Xerte masters. Their feedback was that this is a good example to showcase the Xerte functions, which most users in the education context do not commonly use. This feedback has been the foundation for my journey from novice to a leader in influencing others to design escape rooms and build my confidence. Designing the escape room in Xerte was a pedagogical risk-taking situation. In playful leadership, taking risks (Heljakka, 2023) is beneficial, which I experienced during this journey.

When a game-based learning method was proposed to introduce LMS induction, colleagues knew they could request my support to design an escape room. I accepted the challenge. As most people do, I wanted to go to my comfort zone. That is, I wanted to reuse my first escape room in Xerte. However, further discussions with colleagues indicated that, rather than answering a set of questions, it would benefit students to gain hands-on experience with the LMS. This highlights the transformational leadership within my role to inspire others and build trust with them that I am able to fulfil the task (Anderson, 2017). Further, this made me realise that platform choices should be guided by learning outcomes rather than by convenience.

I did not follow a formal training programme to learn how to use Xerte or to plan the design components (storyline, puzzles, clues, etc.) of an escape room. I followed a responsive learning approach, referring to relevant resources as needed (Brandenburg & Ellinger, 2003). These resources were YouTube tutorials or

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University support guides on Xerte, online resources on escape room design or even support from colleagues to resolve technical errors. I did not know how to add a university theme template to the Xerte resource. I co-designed it with a colleague, highlighting adaptive leadership; thus, collaboration and responsive learning were key components I embraced as an adaptive leader (Khoso et al., 2025).

Building up community with knowledge sharing

The purpose of my efforts was to inspire and influence educators to adapt playful learning in their practice. Therefore, building the community through the experience and knowledge I gained along the way was important.

I shared the Xerte link with colleagues who wanted to play the escape rooms. One of my colleagues suggested sharing the design package so anyone can see the features I have used, and they can practice them to gain more hands-on experience. The escape rooms designed in Xerte and Blackboard Ultra are reusable. They need to change only the quests, but the game mechanics can be reused as they are. This supports anyone new to escape room design so they can easily understand narration, create and sequence puzzles, and include new clues that direct the learner toward progression. This was very useful, as when time and workload are constrained, colleagues can easily reuse them without having to design from scratch (Wiley, 2000). Even the escape room in Blackboard Ultra can be copied into other modules and repurposed as necessary. Further, the experience gained during this journey comprises tacit knowledge (Roungas et al., 2019). Sharing access to my work can help anyone to understand what I have done without any knowledge loss. In addition, I was asked to write a blog to share my experience across the wider educator community. Some colleagues took the initiative to share it with the Fun and Games CoP and with a Game-based Learning professional development session. Further, I was invited to a world café event on playful learning and gamification to share my experience as a playful leader and to take the initiative to promote the design of educational escape rooms.

The knowledge and experience I shared through escape room design inspired colleagues in playful learning practices. There were situations where colleagues said they would use this interactive element in their game-based activity. Therefore, the knowledge I built up is not limited to one type of playful learning approach but it may be worth providing an example of another playful approach here. Further, conversations during coffee catchups focused on colleagues' lack of awareness of digital tools for creating such interactive elements for game-based or playful learning. Therefore, knowledge-wise, the escape rooms designed in Xerte and Blackboard Ultra have enlightened them about the potential of these tools to create escape rooms that are playful and help learners to achieve the learning objectives.

Demystifying the complexity of designing an escape room

Even though playful learning is popular in higher education, there is reluctance to its use due to concerns about infrastructure, resources, or the time required for its practice. This mindset is common in escape room design (Reuter et al., 2020), as we see it as a time and resource consuming task. In my beginner journey into escape room design, referring to many resources and guides were overwhelming. Therefore, I started building an escape room to get experience. Even though there are online escape room templates available, I did not rely on them, as it is beneficial for students and staff to show the escape room designs using existing University tools (Aguirre-Acosta & Espínola-Carballo, 2022). This develops staff awareness while I take the pedagogical risk of experimenting with platforms to assess their suitability for escape room

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design. Based on the colleagues' comments, use of these platforms has enlightened them to design not only escape rooms but also different game-based learning activities. This approach lowered the perceived difficulty level staff had set when they thought about designing game-based learning activities.

During my journey, what I learnt was that I am not on my own. There is help as long as you know how to use it responsibly and ethically. Thus, using AI simplifies the design of compelling stories and visuals required in an escape room. The steps given by Tolen and Moura (2020) to plan and design the escape room were beneficial as their process was simple and easy to follow. Even though such creative benefits are available with the use of AI, human judgment is important to ensure that content is aligned with educational purposes and to allow the achievement of learning outcomes.

When staff use Xerte, they commonly use MCQs, drop-downs, and fill-in-the-blank interactions. Then, in Blackboard Ultra, force sequencing for learners to complete content in an order, releasing content when an action is completed, and formative knowledge checkers are common functions staff use when designing content. This suggests to staff that the escape room design can be done with simple techniques and does not require high-end strategies or technologies. Through my work, I demonstrated how the same functions can be adapted into game-based learning activities.

Discussion

I interpret the above themes through leadership theories and playful learning, reflecting on how my work assisted my leadership development. Additionally, the design of the escape rooms indicated how the work, situated in game-based learning, aligns with the broader term of playful learning. Therefore, the learning was embedded in the game (escape room) itself where the learners progressed through it while engaging in puzzles, narrative and problem-solving. It created opportunities for the learners to construct and apply knowledge without being worried about failing or making mistakes. This study does not simply focus only on the digital tools used to design escape rooms. It highlights the pedagogical relatedness of using the tool to structure the game with a narrative and puzzles while aligning with learning outcomes. This pedagogical relatedness is important for anyone who is planning to design an educational escape room.

In addition to leadership development, becoming confident with the educational escape room design process was another skill developed during this work. The confidence is framed by developing a narrative, aligning with learning outcomes, sequencing puzzles and hints to navigate the game, and obtaining feedback to conduct iterative tests to refine functionality. These capabilities were developed across all three escape rooms, designed without limiting the technologies used. This suggests that pedagogical design practices are important for successful escape room design (Nicholson & Cable, 2021). The findings highlight that different technologies can be used to design educational escape rooms; this is important to ensure that learning design remains the main focus.

Leadership differs from management, as it seeks to motivate and inspire a community to work towards a common goal (Kotter, 2008). In that process, a leader not only leads the community but also collaborates with them during the journey. This work on escape room design influenced the practice of playful learning at the University. The impact of this influence was evident when colleagues considered not only designing escape rooms but applying puzzles into other game-based learning activities. As a novice, helping colleagues build competence in playful learning aligns with transformational leadership (Supermane, 2019). This helped articulate game-based learning (which sits under the umbrella of playful learning) as less

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daunting, while inspiring colleagues how iterative and simple steps push their learning boundaries. This reflection demonstrates taking the role of a leader makes innovations achievable.

The confidence required for this work was built from self-doubting to self-trusting. However, I would not claim it as solely my effort. It is framed within distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2012), where colleagues took leadership in specific areas where I lacked knowledge. To design certificates, I collaborated with a colleague who knows how to use a specific tool (Power Automate). They highlighted how this collaboration involved them in the playful leadership role. Further, embedding this tool highlights innovative practice. However, the limitation of this tool was identified which I emphasised during knowledge sharing with the community so they can guide others appropriately in adopting similar practices in the future.

Additionally, I received support in applying a theme to Xerte to make the interface more professional. Through the collaborations and shared learning with the knowledge experts, I was able to bridge the knowledge gap. As a leader, it is important to recognise knowledge gaps and realise that this is not a failure but a feature of continuous improvement (Chintakananda et al., 2024).

Self-directed leadership in this work inspired colleagues. I promoted playful learning by bridging pedagogy and leadership. Escape rooms in an educational context align with pedagogies that support active and situated learning. When a community is inspired to use such pedagogies through innovations like game-based learning, leadership practice is highlighted. Playful pedagogy and leadership require risk-taking, which was visible throughout this journey. Therefore, leadership emerges through practice rather than by appointing a leadership role (Ainin et al., 2025). Accepting mistakes, sharing the vulnerability of not knowing things, and being transparent about failures were not weaknesses but professional development opportunities. All these characteristics led me to advance from a novice to a leader in playful learning. This work highlights my core practices in educational leadership, playful pedagogies, and appropriate digital tool usage.

Some of the implications drawn from the reflection on my experiences include which design practices are useful for a novice in designing playful learning activities, and which leadership strategies to consider when promoting a playful learning culture.

The design practices for novice designers are:

- Start with a clear learning objective and a small scope. Do not include many objectives, as this would complicate the design plan. A small scope is helpful to complete the activity within a limited time. Otherwise, players get bored and frustrated if the activity is complicated and time consuming.
- Use tools that are commonly used within your institution. This mitigates technical barriers as institutional support teams are available to assist with the failures during the design process. Furthermore, users of the game can receive support as needed. It also promotes sustainability when institutional supported tools are used.
- Collecting feedback is useful because it highlights what did not make sense in the game logic and functions. It helps to identify what needs to be modified to make the logic understandable and usable for everyone.

Leadership strategies to consider when promoting a playful learning culture:

- When unknowns are encountered, do not hesitate to get support. Co-creation helps you to navigate through challenges and helps to overcome those unknowns.

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- Offer demos or showcase what you designed. The more you showcase your work, the more feedback you get that ignites curiosity and builds community knowledge and your knowledge.
- Link your work to the institution's strategic priorities. In our institution, building a student community and strengthening their confidence in digital literacy align with the University's strategy. The escape room designed in Blackboard Ultra to induct students into the LMS is a playful practice that aligns with institutional requirements.
- Appreciate the workload commitments of staff. As leaders, ensure that your work can be adopted and repurposed by staff for use in their context. Allowing the reuse of your work can be the first step towards inspiring staff to develop their own work.
- Remember, it is not about the victory narrative. It is about your learning journey, which comprises success and failure, that could inspire educators that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusion

The interpretive reflection on this paper highlights the leadership role within playful learning pedagogies and innovation. The journey starts with not knowing how to design escape rooms and ends up being an influencer of playful learning practices. Leadership promotes transparency about what you know and do not know, encouraging you to start at least by repurposing what is already there and adapting it to your own context. In leadership terms, distributed, transformational, and playful leader qualities were developed during this journey. They were not built in one go; they were accomplished through small, iterative steps taken collaboratively.

However, this work has limitations, as it focuses on a single context. The context differs from institution to institution, which influences leadership. Further, the feedback shared in this work is informal. Also, the reflector and practitioner of this work are the same person, which causes biases in the reflections and interpretations. To mitigate these limitations, conducting a formal data gathering process incorporating mixed methods (to triangulate findings) would be appropriate. Further, third-party involvement in interpretation can help reduce bias.

In pedagogical innovation, waiting for experts to share practices and innovations does not build one's confidence or leadership. Individual efforts to embrace innovative practices broaden the leadership capabilities. Further, this inspires and influences a community to understand that an innovation is not limited to experts; a novice can do it. Further, leadership titles do not need to be earned until someone becomes an expert. It can be awarded to a person who takes the challenge, is willing to experiment, and shares knowledge with the community.

Biography

Punsisi Somaratne is a learning designer and an early-career educational researcher with a strong interest in playful learning, virtual worlds, inclusive learning and innovative pedagogical practices in higher education. Her work focuses on creating inclusive, engaging learning experiences that support student motivation, collaboration, and knowledge retention. Email: Somaratner@cardiff.ac.uk

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