Escape: The Curse of the Temple - Using a Cooperative Adventure Game to Highlight Leadership, Decision Making, Communication and Individual Differences

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Abstract. Modern board games are enjoying a renewed success. Despite this, their use as an educational tool remains underdeveloped. This manuscript outlines the use of a commercially available tabletop board game, *Escape: The Curse of the Temple* in management courses. In *Escape*, participants must collect treasure and escape an ancient temple before it collapses, trapping them forever. The cooperative nature of the game and the reward for team play makes it ideal to highlight topics such as leadership, decision-making, communication, and individual differences. We provide an overview of the game with our suggested uses in specific teaching scenarios, along with suggested debriefing questions and sample student feedback.

Keywords: board games, cooperation, decision-making, student engagement, innovative teaching.

1. Introduction

Student engagement is a crucial component of an effective learning environment, but can be challenging to facilitate (Culatta 2018; Dean & Fornaciari 2014). Fortunately, educators can use games as a unique avenue for overcoming this challenge (Mercer, Harris, Swab 2021; Plump & Meisel 2020; Van Esch & Wiggen 2020). Board games specifically provide many benefits as a teaching resource, as they (1) are low-cost investments making them widely accessible (2)

are published in multiple languages allowing ease of accessibility for individuals of different nationalities; (3) can be utilized in a single session; (4) can illustrate both macro and micro topics; and (5) are easily adapted and customized to enrich learning experiences.

Although most board games breed competition between players, cooperative board games are unique in that they centered on the players working together to beat the game, emphasizing social interaction and the social aspects of working in a team (reflective of organizational settings). In such games, the players share victory or loss, in that individual players may perform better or worse than others, but the victory can only be collectively earned. This type of board game encourages students to engage in collaborative learning, defined as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (Szul 1995, p. 26). Furthermore, as organizations seek teamwork capability from employees (Dyson, Howley, & Shen 2021), cooperative board games help students' build the necessary skills demanded by employers in an increasingly uncertain and dynamic business world (Collins & Hanson 2011). As such, while there are challenges to designing serious games specifically for educational use, adapting and using commercially available games can be a fruitful option (Castronova & Knowles 2015).

Within this manuscript, we describe our use of *Escape: Curse of the Temple*, a real-time cooperative board game, in an Organizational Behavior (OB) class to demonstrate four core concepts. This game is unique in the word of analog gaming, in that it creates real stress from a simple game mechanic (players are rolling dice to match symbols thereby enabling actions to be performed, while moving across a randomly unfolding board, all within a strict ten-minute time limit). The result is an experience that sees participants engaged in a game of partial and rapidly changing information (akin to a dynamic organizational environment) where communication is key, leadership vital, effective decision making necessary, and participants are quick to value the benefit of individual difference in contributing to the success of the team.

2. Learning Objectives

This game was used to assist students with understanding the various interpersonal behaviors often seen in organizations, which informs the core topics of many OB classes. Specifically, our described exercise(s) focuses on leadership, decision-making, communication, and individual differences. Instructors can further adapt the use of the game to pursue the particular learning goals of their specific class. Our specific learning objectives are:

1. Gaining a simulated experience of working within a team to meet a team goal under significant external pressure (time), thereby allowing

for practical application of course concepts, including but not limited to critical soft skills that can be otherwise difficult to meaningfully demonstrate within a classroom context.

2. Recognizing and applying appropriate decision-making techniques and communication methods.

3. Identifying and applying appropriate leadership styles to achieve team aims and objectives.

4. Recognizing the impact of individual differences on team performance.

In meeting these learning objectives, students not only gain an increased understanding of the four topics, but also use cooperative and collaborative learning to develop their competencies across leadership, communication and decision making – all skills required in today's complex and dynamic organizational world.

3. Overview

Escape: The Curse of the Temple ("*Escape*") is a commercially available cooperative boardgame, first funded on Kickstarter, in which players succeed or fail as a team by collecting gems in order to escape from a temple before it collapses. The standard game supports one to five players and takes approximately ten minutes to play. From the publisher's website: "Escape: The Curse of the Temple is a real-time, cooperative game in which all players must escape from a temple after awakening an ancient curse. Players navigate through the temple by rolling dice and matching symbols to rooms, thereby gaining entry and visibility into adjacent rooms. The temple 'map' randomly unfolds as you explore further, so every game is different! But as you explore, don't wander too far! All players must find the exit before the curse seals the adventurers in forever! The real-time aspect is enhanced by a soundtrack that is your timer for the game."

The cooperative nature of the game, its short rules, brief duration, and simultaneous play make this an excellent tool for team-based learning in the classroom. If classroom teams are larger than one to five in number, the game also lends itself well to having observer(s) who can note and comment on the team's dynamics, inefficiencies, optimizations, and strategies.

The rules for the game are fairly straightforward, especially as explained with open source tutorials on YouTube; such as the following nine-minute "Escape: The Curse of the Temple Demo / Walkthrough (HD)" found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-wP7im1tqc. We also recommend the one-minute

rules recap video found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouF4EFAWyP8. If facilitators are concerned that the rules may appear to be time consuming, we would recommend watching the rules videos above as a take home assignment or spending a brief pre-game session watching these through with participants prior to the experience.

The game is played using tiles that create the board, with the initial game board consisting of three tiles: a starting tile showing the entrance to the temple and two other tiles indicating temple rooms. The remainder of the room tiles are face down in a stack, making players unsure of what they will encounter and when. Players start with their playing piece on the starting tile and five dice each. An optional soundtrack (available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jumjXs5PmGY or a more descriptive downloadable version at https://boardgamegeek.com/filepage/83681/escape-soundtrack-designers-cut) announces key events, from when to start the game, to pointing out when the players must return to the start tile for safety, to the end of the game. For a more detailed review of the individual player actions available, please see Appendix A.

Escape is a particularly useful board game in the classroom, as the game plays in real time, with all players rolling and taking actions simultaneously, rather than sequentially, thereby keeping all student players involved. Players must roll and reroll some or all of their dice as fast as possible to perform all necessary actions—from moving from one tile to the next, to removing the cursed gems keeping them trapped, to revealing new locations to explore. The game features strong cooperative elements. First, as *Escape* does not reward individual victory, the whole team must make it through the exit before the time runs out or the whole team loses. Second, many of the intermediate actions leading up to the escape—removing cursed gems, unlocking frozen dice—benefit from having multiple people work together in the same locations. Third, players need to coordinate their efforts to ensure that the team is effectively and efficiently moving towards victory while managing their time. This is doubly important as at two times during the game, the players must make it back to the start location or else permanently lose one of their five die, making all future efforts much more difficult. While there are strategies for optimizing efforts, there is no one set approach for success, though there are best practices that successful teams will discover.

4. Use in Teaching

Games that have been historically developed for entertainment are now finding a role in teaching and education as they provide participants with experiences in which they practice adaptability, self-expression, immersion, collaboration, and goal setting in a low stake failure environment, thereby promoting meaningful learning (Qian & Clark 2016). Such participation can encourage improvement and retention of critical thinking skills many months later (Yang & Chang 2013). Our use of this resource in undergraduate and graduate-level OB, leadership, and