

Literary Escape Room: Innovative Strategies for Inspiring Young Readers' Response

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ABSTRACT: In an era where digital media increasingly competes with traditional reading practices, educators face the ongoing challenge of reengaging young readers with literature in meaningful and imaginative ways. This article presents a literary escape room based on the Greek youth novel *Mission Logos: The Mystery of the Mobile Phone* by Petros Panau as an innovative approach to reading motivation. Designed with the Genially platform, the digital game transforms the novel's central mystery into an interactive experience composed of 15 riddles that can only be solved through close reading and critical interpretation of the book. By combining narrative immersion, puzzle-solving, and suspenseful aesthetics, the escape room functions as both a motivational trigger and a reading comprehension scaffold. Preliminary feedback from adolescent participants suggests that even non-habitual readers were drawn into the story world, driven by the desire to unlock its secrets. This paper argues that literary escape rooms can serve as powerful tools for promoting reader engagement, fostering collaborative learning, and reimagining how literature is encountered in digital contexts. Future research will examine the impact of such interventions in classroom settings.

KEYWORDS: reading motivation; literary engagement; escape room; digital storytelling; young adult literature; gamification; reader-response theory; multimodal literacy; interactive fiction

INTRODUCTION

In an era where digital media dominates the daily lives of children and adolescents, traditional reading practices often struggle to compete with the immediacy and interactivity of screen-based entertainment (Alvermann, 2002). As educators and researchers seek innovative ways to cultivate reading motivation, particularly in younger audiences, the challenge lies not only in promoting literacy but in transforming reading into an experience that feels meaningful, immersive, and relevant. This article presents a creative and interdisciplinary approach to fostering literary engagement through the design and implementation of a literary escape room—a digital, game-based environment inspired by a contemporary Greek novel for young readers: *Mission Logos: The Mystery of the Mobile Phone* (Part I), written by Petros Panau. Drawing on the popular format of escape room games, which combine narrative, puzzles, and problem-solving, this educational intervention transforms a literary text into an interactive mystery, where students must engage closely with the book in order to decode clues and solve riddles. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to explore how such a hybrid experience—combining literature, digital storytelling, and gamification—can function as a motivational tool for promoting voluntary reading among children and adolescents. Second, to highlight how the design of the literary escape room encourages active reader participation, critical thinking, and emotional involve. The article discusses the pedagogical potential of this approach, emphasizing its role in developing reading habits, enhancing literary appreciation, and cultivating a positive reading identity. Drawing from an educational program implemented in schools, the article highlights the benefits of integrating literary escape rooms into the curriculum as part of a broader strategy for fostering literacy in young learners engagement in the reading process.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The use of literature as an educational tool has been widely supported by scholars in the field of reading promotion. According to Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978), reading is an active process in which the reader constructs meaning through engagement with the text. The literary escape room, with its immersive and interactive nature, aligns with this view by turning passive reading into an active, problem-solving activity (Brown, Darby & Coronel, 2019). Students are no longer mere recipients of information; instead, they become participants in the creation of meaning, making connections between the narrative and their own experiences (Adams, Burger, Crawford, & Setter, 2018 · Craig, Ngondo, Devlin, & Scharlach, 2019).

In addition, contemporary theories on motivation and engagement, such as those put forth by Guthrie et al. (2012), highlight the importance of creating engaging learning environments that encourage active participation. The literary escape room supports this

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by offering a challenge that requires students to use critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity to solve problems, all while engaging with the content of the literature. This hands-on, experiential approach helps foster a sense of ownership and autonomy over learning, which is particularly important for adolescent learners who may otherwise feel disengaged from traditional methods of reading.

The intersection of literary reading and digital interactivity has emerged as a promising field for rethinking reading motivation in the 21st century. Recent research on reader engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation, relevance, and autonomy in cultivating sustained reading habits. These findings align with the need to design learning environments where young readers can experience literature not as a static or solitary act, but as a dynamic process of exploration and discovery.

Escape rooms—originally conceived as live-action puzzle games—have entered the educational field as engaging tools for experiential learning (Veldkamp et al., 2020; Nicholson, 2015). When combined with narrative structures, escape rooms can serve as powerful platforms for immersive storytelling, promoting not only problem-solving and collaboration, but also deep narrative comprehension. In this context, a literary escape room becomes a bridge between the fictional world of a novel and the cognitive-emotional experience of the reader.

This approach draws on constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), which highlight the active role of the learner in constructing meaning through interaction, language, and social engagement. By embedding literary content in a digital mystery that unfolds through clues and critical decisions, the reader becomes an active co-creator of the story's meaning, rather than a passive recipient of text.

Moreover, game-based learning theories (Gee, 2003; Kapp, 2012) suggest that meaningful challenges, feedback, and autonomy can foster learner engagement and identity development. In the context of literature, these elements can reframe reading as a personally relevant and emotionally charged experience—particularly for adolescents who often seek agency and immersion in their learning environments.

By giving motivation to young and youth readers, we provide challenges to enhance literary learning environment and experience the joy of reading combined with the pleasure of game. This innovative strategies contributes to sustained engagement and achievement in reading (Ryan & Rigby, 2019).

Moreover, the project draws on recent research in gamification (Deterding et al., 2011; Huang & Soman, 2013), which explores how game mechanics can increase motivation and engagement in educational settings. The escape room employs typical gamified elements—such as narrative framing, problem-solving tasks, progression structures, and feedback—to scaffold a deeper encounter with the literary text.

In addition, the experience aligns with principles of digital storytelling (Robin, 2008) and multimodal literacy (Kress, 2010), encouraging students to interpret and construct meaning across various semiotic modes—textual, visual, auditory, and interactive. These multimodal environments create new opportunities for literary interpretation, particularly for digital-native adolescents accustomed to non-linear, visually rich communication.

The Literary Escape Room as a Reading Motivation Tool

A literary escape room transforms the experience of reading into an interactive, immersive challenge. Students are invited to step into the world of a literary text, where they must decipher clues, solve puzzles, and unravel mysteries to "escape" the scenario. This experiential form of reading engagement promotes active learning, teamwork, and critical thinking while maintaining a strong connection to the narrative and thematic elements of the text. Through this approach, the literary escape room becomes a tool for not only promoting reading but also enhancing comprehension, creativity, and collaboration (Franco & DeLuca, 2019).

The literary escape room designed for this study was inspired by *Mission Logos: The Mystery of the Mobile Phone (Part I)*, a contemporary Greek novel by Petros Panau, which forms the first volume of a youth-oriented mystery trilogy. The novel revolves around a red mobile phone hidden within the pages of an old book—a device that comes to life through a secret code and has the power to alter human speech. Drawing on this compelling premise, the escape room brings the book's central mystery to life in a gamified environment that invites players to become literary detectives.

Developed using the Genially platform, the digital escape room recreates a suspenseful, detective-style atmosphere. The visual design evokes a sense of secrecy and exploration, while the theme music of the Pink Panther provides a playful but mysterious soundtrack throughout the experience. The player is immediately drawn into the story through an opening message:

"An old book... a hidden red mobile phone... and a secret code that brings it to life. What would you do if you held in your hands a device that could change the words people say? Would you dare to use it?"

In the next room of the game, the intrigue deepens:

"What if an ordinary book concealed a strange secret? What if, instead of pages, you found a red mobile phone that comes to life when you whisper the right words? And what if this device gave you the power to change the words of those around you? Would you dare to use it—or would you fear its power?"

Within this immersive setting, players must solve a series of 15 interactive riddles, each linked to the protagonist and plot of the novel. The puzzles are structured in such a way that progress in the game depends on close reading and comprehension of the literary

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text. Thus, players are indirectly encouraged—or even compelled—to return to the book, reread passages, and search for clues embedded in the narrative.

The escape room culminates in the temporary resolution of the mystery, while intentionally leaving one final clue unresolved. This open-ended riddle is designed to spark anticipation for the second part of the trilogy, sustaining the reader's engagement beyond the immediate experience. The element of suspense, combined with the sense of achievement from solving the puzzles, serves to create a strong motivational loop between reading and playing.

Early feedback from adolescents who participated in the pilot version of the game highlights its motivational potential. One student, Michalis, described the experience as:

"Wow! A cool way to read literature. Now we're talking!"

Another, Panagiota, noted:

"We were completely immersed in the mystery. It was such a fresh, youth-friendly idea. Even members of my team who never read books devoured this one just to win. It was thrilling—and the digital environment was amazing!"

These spontaneous reactions point to the power of gamified narrative environments not only to attract attention, but to convert reluctant readers into curious, active participants in a literary world.

Pedagogical Value and Reader Engagement

The literary escape room does not merely function as a motivational add-on to reading; it becomes an integral part of the interpretive process. By interacting with the narrative through game-based challenges, students are invited to engage in multiple forms of literacy: narrative literacy, critical literacy, and digital literacy. This multimodal interaction fosters both comprehension and creativity, encouraging students to read not only to "understand the story," but to act within it.

One of the most significant impacts of the literary escape room is the promotion of active engagement with the text. Instead of passively reading, students are required to engage critically with the material in order to solve puzzles, decipher clues, and complete challenges. This type of active engagement encourages students to think more deeply about the content of the literary work, as they are prompted to make connections, analyze details, and draw conclusions. The need to piece together clues and solve problems reinforces students' comprehension and analytical skills, helping them to better understand complex literary themes and concepts (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the escape room supports key components of reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), where meaning is co-constructed between reader and text. The game structure amplifies this dynamic by turning the reading process into a problem-solving adventure, requiring students to analyze character motivations, uncover symbolic meanings, and piece together narrative elements as part of their progress.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of the game fosters social interaction and peer discussion, elements long recognized as essential in promoting critical thinking and reader engagement (Alvermann, 2002; Van Leeuwen, & Janssen, 2019). Students must communicate, negotiate, and synthesize their interpretations in real time in order to solve each puzzle—thereby cultivating not only individual comprehension, but collective meaning-making.

The use of digital media also aligns with the preferences and cognitive styles of today's adolescents, who often respond more readily to interactive, non-linear, and visually rich environments (Leu et al., 2013). Rather than viewing technology as a threat to reading, this approach positions it as an ally to literature, opening new avenues for affective and intellectual engagement with texts.

Furthermore, by designing the escape room around an existing literary work, the project bridges school-based reading with authentic literary experiences. The goal is not to gamify reading for its own sake, but to transform the book into an active mystery that unfolds through exploration. In doing so, the escape room encourages young readers not only to decode words, but to decode meaning—deepening their emotional investment in the story and expanding their understanding of what reading can be.

The literary escape room also promotes creativity and problem-solving skills (Nicholson, 2015, 2016). As students work through the challenges, they are encouraged to think outside the box, come up with innovative solutions, and apply their creativity to interpret the text in new ways. This creative approach to literary analysis helps students develop a more flexible and imaginative mindset, which can enhance their ability to approach problems in other areas of learning as well.

One of the most significant outcomes of the literary escape room program is the increase in student motivation and enjoyment of reading. The gamified nature of the escape room creates a sense of excitement and competition, which motivates students to engage more fully with the text. The interactive and immersive nature of the activity helps make reading more enjoyable and less of a chore, encouraging students to develop a lasting love for literature.

Through the literary escape room, students not only enhance their literary skills but also develop a positive reading identity. By participating in an engaging and enjoyable literary activity, students begin to see themselves as capable readers and critical thinkers. The program helps students develop confidence in their reading abilities, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning and encouraging them to pursue further reading outside of the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project illustrates how the convergence of literature, digital design, and game-based learning can create a powerful motivational framework for young readers. By transforming a novel into an interactive mystery, the literary escape room offers students not only a playful gateway into reading, but a meaningful space for narrative immersion, critical thinking, and emotional engagement.

Preliminary student reactions point to the effectiveness of this approach in reaching both avid and reluctant readers. The excitement generated by the narrative puzzles, combined with the satisfaction of solving them, fostered a desire to explore the book in greater depth—demonstrating that reading can be both an intellectual and experiential adventure.

Importantly, the escape room did not replace the book—it guided students back to it. In this sense, the intervention functioned as a bridge between digital culture and literary tradition, using the logic and aesthetics of games to reignite curiosity for stories told through text.

The project also highlights the potential of such literary experiences in broader educational contexts. While this article presents a single digital escape room based on *Mission Logos: The Mystery of the Mobile Phone*, future applications could extend this model to other literary genres, cultural contexts, and age groups. Moreover, the inclusion of a “mystery riddle” at the end of the game opens up a serial dimension, inviting readers to continue their journey in the subsequent volumes of the trilogy.

In the coming school year, the project will be implemented in classroom settings as part of a structured research study. This next phase will aim to document student engagement, reading behaviors, and literacy development more systematically, offering empirical insight into the pedagogical impact of literary escape rooms. Ultimately, this work seeks to reaffirm the power of literature in a digital age—not by resisting technological change, but by reimagining the ways stories can be experienced, shared, and loved. The literary escape room has proven to be a highly effective tool for engaging students with literature in an interactive and immersive way (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013 · Krashen, 2004). By transforming literary analysis into a dynamic, hands-on experience, it not only enhances students' understanding of the text but also fosters the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving.

This program demonstrates that reading promotion does not need to be limited to traditional methods. Instead, innovative and experiential approaches like the literary escape room offer new possibilities for engaging students with literature and cultivating a lifelong love for reading. The escape room format encourages students to actively engage with texts, moving beyond mere comprehension to deeper levels of analysis, interpretation, and personal connection.

The impact of the literary escape room on students' engagement and learning outcomes highlights the importance of integrating creative and interdisciplinary approaches into educational practices. Literature can be a powerful tool for fostering personal expression, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness, especially when it is connected to dynamic, real-world experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Literary escape rooms, as innovative educational tools, open up new possibilities for engaging students with literature through experiential and playful learning. The following recommendations aim to support the integration of this approach into school settings and to further explore its potential within educational practice:

1. **Integration into Curriculum:** Schools should consider incorporating literary escape rooms into the curriculum as a means of enhancing literary engagement and promoting critical thinking. These interactive experiences provide a novel way to approach literature while aligning with curricular goals.
2. **Training Educators:** Teachers should receive training in how to design and implement literary escape rooms effectively. Educators can benefit from learning how to blend traditional literary analysis with interactive, gamified activities that increase student engagement.
3. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The literary escape room is an ideal platform for fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers. English, art, music, and even technology educators can collaborate to create an enriched escape room experience that incorporates multiple disciplines and skills.
4. **Further Research:** More research should be conducted to assess the long-term impact of literary escape rooms on student motivation, reading habits, and academic achievement. Future studies could explore how such programs influence students' attitudes toward reading and learning in general.
5. **Expansion of the Concept:** To ensure broad applicability, the concept of the literary escape room can be adapted for various age groups, literary genres, and educational contexts. It can be used in both primary and secondary education, as well as in extracurricular programs, to engage students with a wide range of literary texts.

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