



Gamifying Art History: On Employing an Escape Room to Facilitate Interest and Critical Thinking on Art Crime and Repatriation

By J. Baar

Contrary to what modern media may suggest, not all art crime includes dramatic museum break-ins or back-alley deals. Many cases of artworks with an uncertain history of ownership, or provenance, are much more complicated. Some artifacts are taken from the country of origin by colonial powers, while others are given to museums but are kept after the request for return under the guise of safety. In many situations, there are underlying motivations that lead to the museums' desire to keep artifacts within their collections such as local and international politics, or monetary incentives. Art repatriation, the act of returning an object back to the people or country of origin, is a relatively new concept. Only within the last decades have we seen communities standing up for their social and cultural history, demanding that museums or colonial powers return their heritage. It is my intention to bring attention to this subject. From November 17th to December 3rd, 2022, I offered a free Escape Room in the University of Texas at Arlington's Central Library with the primary goal of motivating students, faculty, and staff to form complex, critical thoughts on art repatriation and art crime through an immersive, gamified learning experience, as well as increase their interest in this field of study.

Escapees

Participants who attended the room had varying levels of expertise, some being well-acquainted with escape rooms, having attended more than 5, while others were experiencing this for the first time. While there was no targeted marketing towards a specific group of people, the room was held at the University of Texas at Arlington and the main method for gaining participation was from walk-in traffic and mass emails to students, staff, and faculty. Thus, the intended audience for this game was adults. While there was at least one group with young children, the majority of escapees were adults. All interviews and reviews were taken from individuals over the age of eighteen.

Procedure & Design

Upon first entering the space, they were asked if they had ever been to an escape room before. If the answer was no, they were given a brief introduction explaining that they would be “locked” in the room with a goal (though due to campus safety requirements, the door was never actually locked). To meet their goal, which would be presented shortly after, they would have to find varying puzzles, clues, and locks. They could leave at any point in the process, such as for emergencies or restroom breaks. A few ground rules are laid out as well. Nothing in the room requires the action of ripping, breaking, or cutting. There were no mechanical devices, such as light switches or wall outlets, that needed to be manipulated in any way. Lastly, if a lock is not working with a key or combination, escapees were instructed to not try to force it. Nothing needed to be forced or physically manipulated, if escapees guessed the correct combination.

After this brief introduction to defining the expectations of an escape room and the primary rules while inside, whoever was running the room switches into the introductory

narration. I found that when there was a shift in tonality and presence, it was a good non-verbal cue that the immersive experience was beginning. There were a total of four individuals who were hired to run the room while it was open. Their time was compensated through funds awarded by the UTA Libraries Open Initiatives Grant program. Given this diversity, there was leniency in how the introductory information was provided as long as the participants were given a few basic clues to start their journey. First, context was provided: the attendees were interns for a fictional character, Dr. Redbud, a very forgetful individual. Second, this academic's 'adventures' may not be as honorable as they seem. Third, the participants were asked to find a Buddha statue and bring it back to the front desk.

The room was designed around the character of Dr. Redbud, mixing a modern office with an antique academic aesthetic. Props and other materials were purchased using funds awarded from the UTA Libraries grant as well. There were books on art history stacked purposefully haphazardly on the desk and file cabinets. Thanks to the UTA Libraries' Special Collections, the project was loaned two beautiful antique armchairs and a cylindrical cabinet decorated with superimposed maps. Four large frames of maps leaned against the walls of the room, functioning as both a puzzle piece and decor. During the experience, the fluorescent lights were turned off, and it was lit instead by three lamps aiding the mysterious atmosphere.

The Puzzles

Throughout the room, there were a total of five puzzles. Four non-linear puzzles progressed without input from the others and one final, concluding puzzle required a clue from each of the four starter puzzles. This design was developed based on consultation with a local escape room expert. In his experience, non-linear room progression has the highest levels of

participation and positive response.¹ In a room that requires puzzle A to open puzzle B, then puzzle B to open puzzle C, and so on, contestants either get stuck or often become bored, especially in cases of groups where the work cannot be divided.² This room was created to work best with two to four individuals, thus the escapees would need to maintain a certain level of engrossment. To clarify each of the puzzles, so that there was some form of direction, each component of the four puzzles was labeled with a circular sticker, color coded per puzzle. This design element evolved after six UTA Libraries staff members participated in previewing the escape room. These previewers found that the room required a bit more direction, given the amount of reading involved for example, to ensure that escapees could complete the room in a relatively short amount of time.

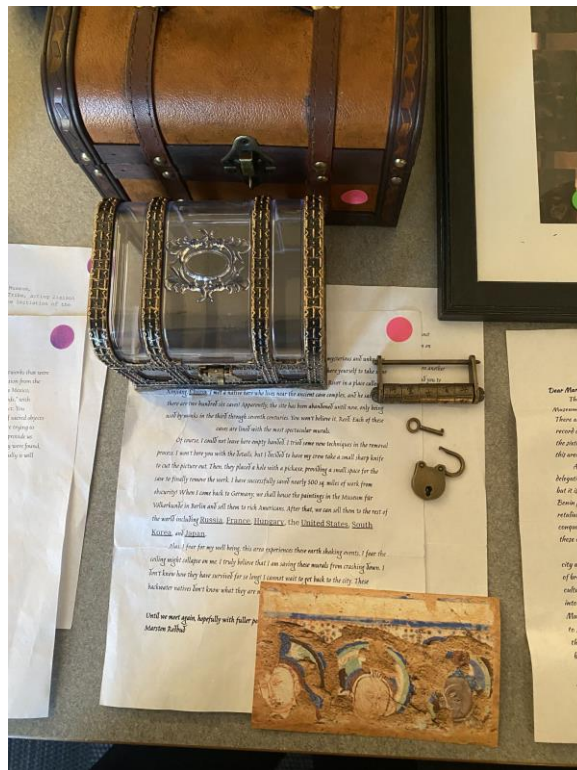


Figure 1. Baar, Image of *Kizil Grottoes Puzzle elements*, ink on paper, chinese character lock, circular pink stickers, 2022.

¹ Craig Ferris, personal communication, August 2022. Mr. Ferris is a local entrepreneur who has professionally opened escape rooms through the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

² Ibid.

The first of the four puzzles, in no specific order, dealt with the *Kizil Grotto fragments*, objects removed from their original location in Xinjiang, China.³ The first key was hidden beneath two papyrus artworks (modern facsimiles of ancient Egyptian art) with a magnifying glass on top to bring attention to the area. That key unlocked a clear box with the first letter between two fictional characters, Dr. Redbud and Dr. Reed Hosta. In this first letter, the two characters imply that they will be going on an adventure to visit the *Kizil Grottoes* (Fig. 1). Within this parchment is a Chinese code to the next lock. When escapees found and opened the second box in this sequence, they revealed a letter describing the travels of the fragments.⁴

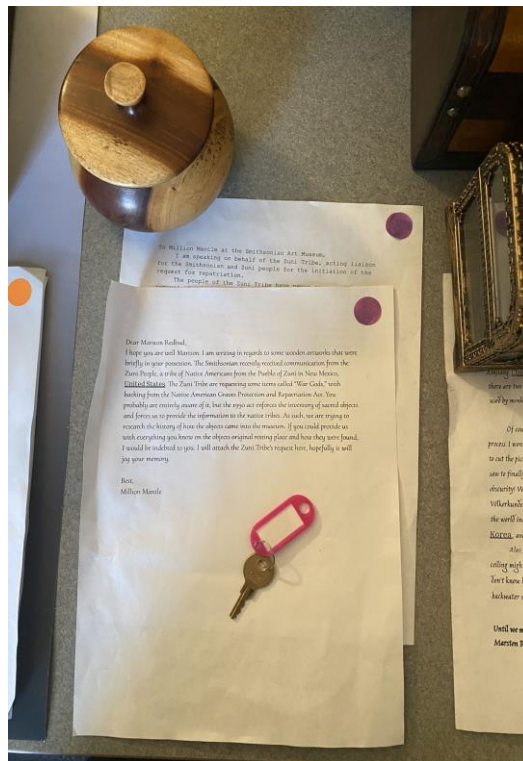


Figure 2. Baar, Image of *Zuni War God Puzzle*, ink on paper, key, circular purple stickers, 2022.

³ Choices for specific artwork cases followed from my studies as an art history major at UT Arlington and conversations with my faculty mentors. Inclusion of the Kizil Grottoes was inspired by coursework with Dr. Fletcher Coleman and his personal research in Xinjiang, China, as a major hub along the northern tracks of the Silk Roads.

⁴ See Albert von Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan: An Account of the Activities and Adventures of the Second and Third German Turfan Expeditions*, (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018); Valerie Hansen, “Gateway to the Languages of the Silk Road: Kucha and the Caves of Kizil,” In *The Silk Road: A New History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2015): 56-81.

The history of the *Zuni War Gods* or *Ahayuda*, wooden sculptures of living deities honored by Zuni people as guardians,⁵ was also explored in this experience.⁶ This puzzle was seemingly simpler, in that it required finding a key in a wooden jar, which opened a large armoire in the room (Fig. 2). The resulting letters, a set of two were hidden beneath packing papers, and bubble wrap, resulting in a very tactile experience. The packing materials were included to hint at the activities of Dr. Rosebud, perhaps shipping items he should not have been removing from their place of origin. The two letters talk about the request for the return of the *Zuni War Gods*, and the beliefs of the people of the Pueblo of Zuni about what occurs when they are removed from their intended place.⁷

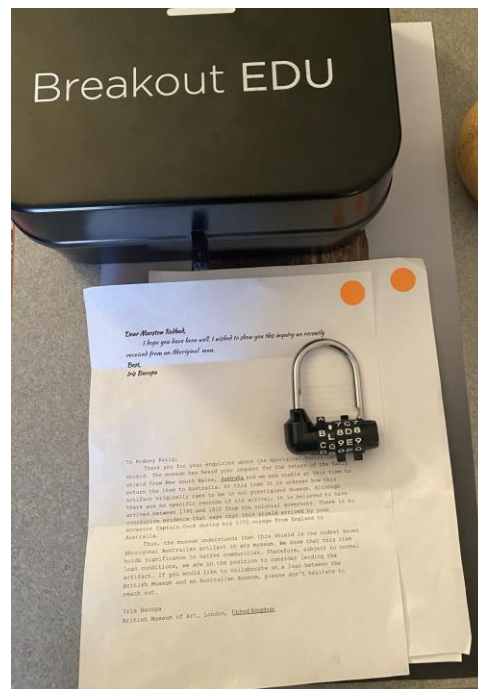


Figure 3. Baar, Image of *Gweagal Shield Puzzle*, ink on paper, five-pin combination alphanumeric lock, circular orange stickers, 2022.

⁵ The United States Department of Justice, "Recovery of Zuni War Gods," *Environment and Natural Resources Division*. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/enrd/recovery-zuni-war-gods>.

⁶ Inclusion of Zuni cultural history and artworks stems from my personal research into cases of art theft and looting.

⁷ See Peter Bolz, "Repatriation of Native American Cultural Objects — Confrontation or Cooperation?" *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 118, no. 1 (1993): 69–77; Adele Merenstein, "The Zuni Quest for Repatriation of the War Gods: An Alternative Basis for Claim." *American Indian Law Review* 17, no. 2 (1992): 589–637; Merrill, et al. "The Return of the Ahayu: Da: Lessons for Repatriation from Zuni Pueblo and the Smithsonian Institution [and Comments and Replies]." *Current Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (1993): 523–67.

Next, there was a parchment with an image of the *Gweagal Shield* created by Aboriginal Australians and taken by either Captain Cook after meeting indigenous Australians for the first time in 1770 or Joseph Banks in 1771 (Fig. 3).⁸ On the back of the printed image was a small written clue that alluded to an essay on this shield by Gaye Sculthorpe, an Australian museum curator.⁹ A printed copy of this article, with five highlighted sections, was placed near the entrance to the room so that escapees would be curious about its contents. Escapees needed to review the article, determine that the first letter of each highlighted section would combine into a code, and input the code into the correct lock to retrieve another letter. The letter is a response to a recent request for repatriation and it explores how the artwork came to the British Museum of Art.¹⁰



Figure 4. Baar, Image of *Benin Bronze Puzzle*, ink on paper, frame, four-pin pressure combination lock, circular green stickers, 2022.

⁸ Nick Miller, “The gripping story of the Gweagal Shield,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (May 11, 2019). <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/the-gripping-story-of-the-gweagal-shield-20190511-p51mbe.html>. Inclusion of this example also derived from my course-related research into examples of repatriation requests.

⁹ Gaye Sculthorpe, “Same Objects, Different Stories: Exhibiting ‘Indigenous Australia,’” *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 30 (2017): 79–103.

¹⁰ Nick Miller, “The gripping story,” 2019.

The last starter puzzle explored the so-called *Benin Bronzes* (Fig. 4), a vast number of bronze and brass items produced by artists of the Benin Kingdom of 16th-19th century Nigeria.¹¹ This puzzle required two clues that would be found around the room, one under a pillow and the other under a fake plant. These two written clues led to a framed photo of many Benin Kingdom bronze plaques as currently displayed in the British Museum. Using the two clues, the puzzle reads from left to right, top to bottom, as in a book in the English language. Escapees derive a four-digit code from this puzzle to unlock a four-pin combination lock, leading to a short correspondence between a fictional person at the British Museum and Dr. Redbud. Describing the history of the *Benin Bronzes* coming from the Kingdom of Benin after the imperial British conquest, this letter aims to portray both sides of the quest for repatriation.¹² Due to the difficulty level of this puzzle, the four-pin combination lock also gives the participants the key to the drawer with the locked box holding the Buddha statue.

With each of the four starter puzzles solved, the organization turns from non-linear to linear. The last puzzle is the grand finale, unlocking the lockbox which presumably contains desired buddha statue, that precise stated goal from the introductory narrative. There were four obviously placed framed maps around the room, all of which were facsimiles of historic maps held in cartographic collections around the world and one of which is held in UTA Libraries' Special Collections. Each had a colored sticker with a number on it, coinciding with their respective starter puzzles. Another subtle nod was given by adding a red dot on each of the maps roughly around the location of origin for each object from the starter puzzles. To unlock the final box, participants had to derive a code by adding the number of countries through which an

¹¹ Barnaby Phillips, *LOOT: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. Oneworld Publications, 2022. Inclusion of this very famous and prescient example of repatriation debates developed through my conversations with Dr. Leah McCurdy.

¹² "Benin Bronzes," Contested objects from the Collection, The British Museum, Accessed 14 Dec. 2022. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes>.

artwork traveled as described in each of the letters found during the starter puzzles. Then, escapees had to order those numbers based on the sequence of the maps. Once they found the Buddha statues, escapees should be concerned that if they hand it over to Dr. Redbud, they may be complicit in another act of illegal movement of cultural antiquities!

Reviews and Impressions

Overall, the responses to the room were overwhelmingly positive. Many of the participants left the room with big smiles, proudly presenting the Buddha statue, including a group of art history professors (one of which inspired aspects of the room)! There were mixed sentiments, but the *Benin Bronzes* and *Gweagal Shield* puzzles were the most popular and favored. There were no negative reviews of the *Zuni War god* puzzle and the *Kizil Grotto fragments* puzzle, but they were scantily mentioned during interviews. While there is no doubt that this room was a success in terms of engrossment and interest, there is room for improvement in how the experience teaches the complicated concepts of art crime.

Yet, the question remains, did the room result in the intended goal? Did any of the participants develop complex, critical thoughts on art repatriation? Was anyone so immersed they found themselves yearning to learn more about these topics? According to personal interviews that will remain anonymous, the results were mixed. One student who came into the room was spurred into a discussion with their teammates on the topic of archeology and art crime. Another group said that the room was “well designed,” “fun, and very interesting.” With some background in art history, they believed that this room was a great introduction to the subject.

A group of three individuals thought that the *Gweagal Shield* article by Sculthorpe gave validity to the history of the room but the room was presented as too fictionalized. Two of the participants had partaken in many escape rooms, so to them, the room presented as another fictional landscape, but with a specific theme in interesting artifacts. One of the escapees said they would be unlikely to actively pursue studies in this subject, but if media was presented to them soon after experiencing the room, they would be likely to engage with it. However, if they were presented with the same media with more distance from the experience, the less likely they would be to consume media on art repatriation.

If this study were to be repeated, there are quite a few changes that would be enacted prior to its opening. First and most importantly, within the marketing and exposure of the room, there needs to be clarification on the historical intent of the game. The initial thought was to entice visitors by simply alluding to art crime, but it may have hindered the goal of advancing art history knowledge. Without clear identification of the historical accuracy of the artifacts involved, it was easy for participants to leave the room without understanding the artwork's role in art repatriation. Secondly, the trial period prior to the room's opening would have benefitted from extended time for reviews and suggestions. There were only two groups who reviewed the room prior to its release. This resulted in a rocky beginning to the room. It is difficult to anticipate how people will think through puzzles. For example, the *Benin Bronze* puzzle was a failure point for attendees until a grid clue was added to the code-building image per suggestion of one of the room's moderators. As well, the *Benin Bronze* puzzle has a very temperamental pressurized locking mechanism that would frequently jam. There would need to be some substitute in place of this lock. Although listening to each person's opinions on the room

revealed a lot of valuable feedback, the room would benefit from mixed analytics. There might be a questionnaire or short survey in addition to the personal interviews.

Although it was not perfect and the results were not as predicted or intended, this escape room project presents itself as an opportunity. Through the utilization of gamifying learning experiences, a larger audience could be approached to understand and be interested in art history. This adventure progresses an idea for a creative outlet for dispersion of critical material such as art repatriation. On a personal level, creating and participating in this escape room was pure enjoyment. I hope to recreate and improve this method of transference for academic material and gain more smiles from escapees who choose to engage in the room.

Acknowledgements

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