

Locked-Door Office Hours

Introduction

There are rumors among the students in Professor Emmanuel's introductory physics class. They say that the eccentric old man kidnaps students he doesn't like and sacrifices them to a Satan-worshipping cult.

You and your friends just want help on the problem set at office hours. You don't believe any of the gossip. One day, you show up to his office hours, but no one's there. The more you look around, the more ... off ... things seem.



Synopsis

This game is an escape room adventure where players are both uncovering a story and playing as investigators. You and your friends are playing as students who have come to the professor's office hours and are skeptical of the rumors.

Initially, the players start off in the "office hours" room, where they start off being told that the professor never showed up. In this room, players get first glimpses of something being wrong, as they solve puzzles to unlock the next room. As this is an office hours space, the puzzles here would focus more on academic subjects (looking at a textbook where certain pages are highlighted, or deciphering a diagram that reveals a bigger picture if you look at it from a different angle).

Once they find the right clues to unlock the second room, players are led to the professor's private office. In this space, it is very obvious that something is wrong. Clues in this area will include police files of missing students, a wall with evidence connecting their disappearances, and contacts of "accomplices" who may have been involved in kidnappings. There are also messages on the professor's computer linking him to cult activities.

When the players solve the puzzles in this room, they think they've got the professor all figured out - he is part of an evil cult that has been kidnapping and sacrificing students at Stanford University for decades. However, when the third and final room is unlocked, it is revealed that the professor's young daughter was murdered years ago and he has never gotten over it. He has continued to investigate local missing people and connections to a dark cult in an attempt to find out what happened to her. This phase is more explorative and focuses on emotions and storytelling rather than puzzle solving, leaving the players to draw their own conclusions about their professor.

Stories

The Disappearance of Gracie

Gracie Emmanuel was the professor's 18-year-old daughter who was a student at Stanford University nineteen years ago. She disappeared under mysterious circumstances before her body was discovered in Lake Lagunita. The only clues left were cult symbols scratched into nearby trees, and similar murders happened on university campuses across California. The professor has spent years obsessively searching for the cult responsible for his daughter's death, leading to rumors among the student body that he is scary and suspicious.



The Investigative Students

This is the story of the players! They are introduced to their background via voiceover at the beginning of the story - they are students who just want help during office hours, and they don't pay much attention to the rumors about their professor. But when the professor fails to show up, they take matters into their own hands and begin snooping around, leading to some interesting discoveries.

Setting

Our escape room is set in the present day at Stanford University on the 4th floor of the Durand building, which is being used as an Office Hours space near a professor's office. The main rooms we will be using will be decorated as follows:

Room 1 – Office Hours Space

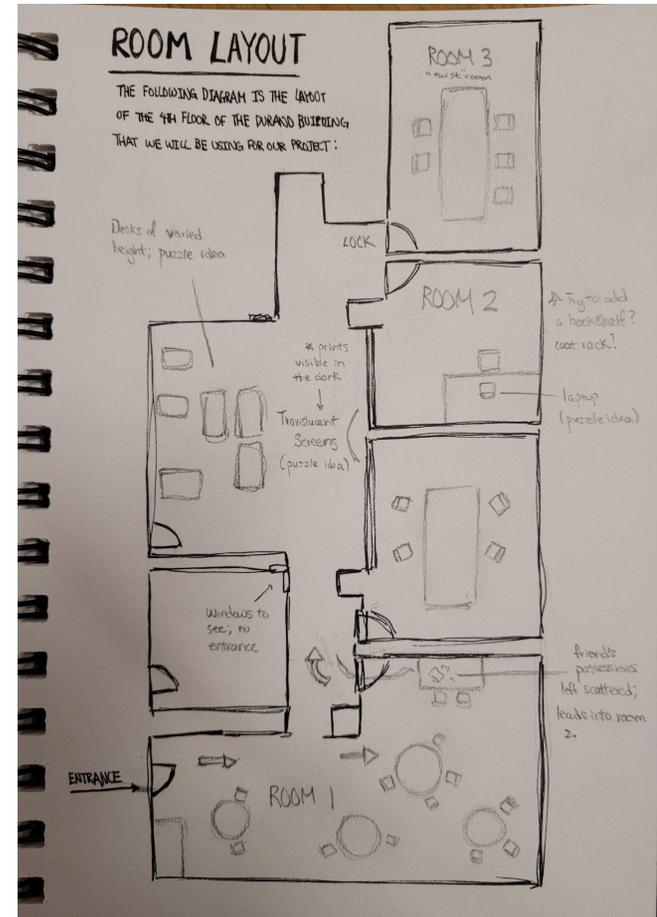
The escape room starts in the general Office Hours area meant for students. This space will look similar to what a professor's room for Office Hours looks like at Stanford: we will have a whiteboard, tables, chairs. To motivate the investigation, we will lay out a student's belongings in a corner of the room, with a few items slightly off to lead in a certain direction. It could be one item that does not belong to the room, a chair thrown across the room, or a weird physics equation written across the whiteboard.

Room 2 – Cult Office

This room is the Professor's secret or private office. Students are not allowed inside, but we will use the curiosity from the layout of the first room to lead students to the second. It will have a lot of weird objects and props such as posters, portraits, letters, skeletons, candles, capes and gowns, that will make it clear that the Professor is in some sort of cult. This room will therefore be dark and ominous, giving a sense of fear and urgency to the players once they reach this stage.

Room 3 – “Twist” Room

The escape room ends in the room with a “twist”. Here, it is revealed that the Professor is actually not part of a cult but instead This room will be decorated based on the twist element. It would still have some creepy vibes but would be visibly different from the cult room to make sure to reflect the change of mood caused by the “twist”.



Gameplay / Types of fun / Who is this for?

We intend for our escape room to have different twists, and to allow the players to piece together the story on their own rather than overtly telling them. Since we only open with the premise that players are looking for their missing friend, we allow them to naturally discover scattered possessions and the cult room (Room 2), and rely on them drawing their own assumptions. Our game will have puzzles to distribute information, but will be more of a storytelling experience. Thus, the primary types of fun for our escape room will be narrative and fellowship, along with some elements of fantasy in impersonating different characters. Our audience will ideally be players who like deducing story lines (with twists!) on their own, with moderate difficulty challenges along the way. Because this is above everything else an escape room, the ideal players also like exploring and solving puzzles, especially in group settings.

Our guest speaker Laura Hall mentioned that people do not usually remember the narrative after playing an escape room, since they focus more on the puzzles and human interactions. From personal experience, we barely remember the narratives of the escape rooms that we have played. One way to help with this, like Laura Hall suggested, is to make sure the puzzles are connected to the narrative. We also hope that a twist in our narrative will be really surprising and impactful to the players to help enhance the narrative experience.

Tone references

We are aiming for a beautiful, yet slightly creepy and unsettling vibe to pair with our gothic, dark academic aesthetic.

Dark academia is a subculture that romanticizes learning but also accentuates the creepy, almost eerie aspect of seeking knowledge. Much of this aesthetic focuses on the old, unfeeling architecture of college campuses or schools, taking bright college campuses and transforming them into gothic, vintage institutions with centuries of history and untold secrets.

Aesthetic Inspiration

An interest in classical literature, languages such as Latin, Greek or French, architecture, art, poetry and fashion from Western Europe characterize the subculture

Gothic - especially university architecture

Dark Academia

Classical and Christian mythology

Vintage Academia

Media Inspiration

The Da Vinci Code

Harry Potter

Dead Poets' Society

The Secret History

Northanger Abbey, 2007

Black Swan, 2010

Frankenstein

Miss Fisher Murder Mysteries, 2012



Like with any of our aesthetic inspirations, our narrative similarly follows many of the characteristics often found in dark academia, focusing itself on elements of “coming of age”, or a story from which the characters gain a greater sense of self through the contact with the unknown. We also focus on similar themes/tones of “relentless pursuit of knowledge at all costs”, “gothic horror”, and “murder.” Our ideal tone leans into the morbidity of dark academia and deals with the strange, unusual, and frightening aspects of dark academia. By locating ourselves within Durand, our theme situates itself on a foreign place for an unforeign concept (Office Hours), forcing our characters to deal with the unnatural head on.



Puzzles / hints

The dark academia subculture is well known to be filled with interesting and cryptic puzzles, often for students to decipher and uncover. Similarly, our escape room will feature many of these same themes.

Within our game, we plan to place strategic puzzles throughout the environment. These clues and puzzles may feature police files of missing students, a wall with evidence connecting their disappearances, and contacts of “accomplices” who may have been involved in kidnappings. The goal of the puzzles is to advance the general narrative and the story, which is an investigative story.

Hints

As with all themes of Dark Academia, the focus of the narrative rests on an understanding of knowledge, hence our setting is an educational institution, one centuries old with countless untold secrets. The job of our characters and players and narrative is to slowly uncover those secrets, which is why puzzles are the best way for minigames to advance our narrative and our character.

As mentioned above and below, hints to advance the story can come in many shapes and sizes – for one, given that the narrative centers around Office Hours, many of the hints and puzzles can be based on their knowledge of the concepts. Another idea is to focus on the student’s investigative skills, which will require dexterous thinking and ability to link many concepts together. When being introduced the narrative and files, clues will feature various hints that require players to “connect the dots” on the different elements of themes within the story to solve the puzzle and advance forward. Uncovering this

Inspiration from Existing Games, with Rationale

Jigsaw puzzles. Jigsaw puzzles are often fixtures of old and vintage subculture. For many, it requires an understanding of a larger vision and image in place, with careful and precise movements and understanding of what’s to come. Our game will feature similar themes.

Riddles. Since dark academia focuses on education, knowledge, and liberation, riddles will be a great way to test our characters’ knowledge and make them have to initiative themselves with the theme and narrative. Because our narrative centers around an unsuspecting student stumbling into Office Hours, our riddles may feature similar concepts from the class they’re taking, forcing the student to remember knowledge

Chess, Checkers. Dark Academia prides itself on its focus on knowledge and education, with many of its roots stemming from gothic Western Europe aesthetics. Having a centuries-old game focused on strategy, manipulation, and thinking two steps ahead is an essential part of driving not only the aesthetic theme home but the narrative of dealing with the unknown, trying to escape persecution, and investigation. Dark Academia also focuses on

Clue, various detective games. At the heart of our story, there is a detective story. We want to place ourselves as an investigative narrative with a setting or location in Dark Academia. There are many types of detective games; many of which require the player to solve the overarching puzzle before some time (say, Midnight), which will require the



player to go through a series of mini-puzzles, as well as encounter some Easter Eggs, which will often build the narrative of the story, reveal more about the different characters, and also help the character advance forward. These games are often mindbending and hard to decipher by nature, as they are not clear, straightforward puzzles with a clear goal; instead, it requires the players to form their own subjective opinions, which again advances the overall narrative. Our biggest question will always focus on the professor and their intentions. Our clues will add to the story and also force our players to make investigative decisions to get closer to finding the truth.

Key challenges for design

Structuring big reveals. As part of our story, we are planning on having two big reveals – (1) that the professor is secretly a cultist which kidnaps students (as the player is led to suspect) and (2) that the professor is not actually kidnapping students – instead, the professor is looking for closure after their own child was taken by the cult long ago. There are two tricky things here which we need to balance. Firstly, we need to make sure the player isn't caught completely off guard by the twists – we should build up to and hint at the reveals without outright revealing them until the twist. Secondly, we need to make sure that the narrative doesn't become too complex for the player to understand in the time allotted. Since we only have around 40 minutes, we need time for the player to process each twist and not become lost in the story.

Being creepy. We need to strike the right balance between creating an illusion of normalcy (but with a feeling that something is off) and conveying a sense of scariness. If we make our game too normal-feeling, then the player will lose their sense of urgency and will not be prepared for our big twists. On the other hand, we don't want to make our game too scary either – otherwise, we won't build up to each twist appropriately and our setting won't be believable as an office. We plan to playtest early and often in order to make sure we hit the tone of our game right – this will affect how we present our puzzles, transition between rooms, and in general how we decorate the space to convey a sense of creepiness.

Letting players explore. After exploring the space, we noticed that Durand 410 is a bit sparse in decorations – the main room has some bare tables and chairs and that's it. We want to convey a sense of investigative curiosity in our escape room and let the player explore the space. To do that, we need decorations fitting the theme which the player can look through for clues, keys, and useful information. Since we have limited set-up time and no official budget, we need to be very thoughtful in the decorations, puzzles and locks we choose and design our layout to be able to be pre-assembled as much as possible so that we can create an immersive experience which allows for exploration yet which also can be set-up and taken-down quickly.

Key challenges for tech

Lighting. The natural light of Durand 410 is a bit harsh and there is no natural light – the space doesn't convey quite the sense of creepiness which we hope to convey. If we want our lighting to help create a creepy atmosphere, we will have to experiment with modifications to the lighting or alternative lighting sources. Some ideas which we plan to experiment with include: turning the lights off and giving players flashlights, using thin dark tissue paper to dampen the already-present lights, turning off the already-present lights and using our own lamps instead, and turning off the lights and placing candles strategically around the room.

Seamless transitions between rooms. We plan to use the large main room, the small hallway connecting to it, and one of the small offices connecting to the hallway within our escape room. Creating believable and increasingly-creepy transitions between our spaces will require clever door-opening mechanisms. For example, if there is just a locked door within a professor's office, that might break the illusion – professors normally don't just have locked doors in their office. On the other hand, if we have a secret or initially-obscured way to access each room – such as sliding furniture to hide the door, decorative concealment to make the locked room seem like a custodial closet originally, or a hidden keyhole – then the transitions may better fit our escape room's theme.

Arduino-activated door unlock. For one of our doors, in order to incorporate a digital component into our escape room, we plan to use an Arduino to unlock the door. We have limited experience working with Arduinos so this will be a new challenge for us. Since the door is manually locked, we plan to use the Arduino in a creative way, such as creating a puzzle using the Arduino which will dispense the key to the door. Ideas include a figure-out-the-code logic puzzle which will require the player to press certain buttons in a certain order, a reaction-based puzzle which will display a light and have the player react quickly, or a puzzle which requires the player to make a connection between two disparate points in order to create an electrical current that will cause the key to dispense.

Key challenges for art

Different yet connected art style for each room. We are planning on having three rooms in our escape room: the main office area, a cult room hidden behind a door, and a room at the end to convey a “twist” – the professor is a tragic character and not an evil cultist. The rooms shouldn’t feel disjoint from each other art-wise but at the same time they each need to convey a different theme. We plan to accomplish this by having an overall theme of “dark academia” which will be present in each room, as well as a secondary and unique sub-theme for each room: an office theme, a cult theme, and a family / grieving theme.

Dark academia tone. We want to convey two simultaneous notions with our theme – both a studious and perhaps somewhat-cluttered academic tone as well as an eerie and unsettling darker tone. Striking the right balance between these two tones will be integral to the success of our game. We are taking inspiration from Harry Potter and Pinterest boards on “dark academia” in order to help us design the right and carefully-balanced art style for our game. We plan to playtest early and often in order to make sure our tone is conveyed correctly and that our tone is consistent throughout our game, despite different designs for each room.

Art which has quick set-up and take-down. Since we only have thirty minutes to set up our escape room and must take it down quickly after to make time for the next group to set up, we need to be very thoughtful in how we design our decorations so that they are quick to set up and take down. For example, we should pre-build as much as possible so that we don’t have to assemble small decorations when we get to Durand 410 – instead, we can simply move our pre-built large pieces in and be mostly ready to go.

Appendix (Links to individual concept docs)

<https://mechanicsofmagic.com/2022/05/02/eunji-lee-p2-concept/>

<https://mechanicsofmagic.com/2022/05/02/concept-document-jason-ah-chuen/>

<https://mechanicsofmagic.com/2022/05/02/ben-liao-p2-concept/>

<https://mechanicsofmagic.com/2022/05/02/ricky-grannis-vu-p2-concept/>

<https://mechanicsofmagic.com/2022/05/02/8223/>