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Wits required for America's Escape Game

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I can hear growling, and it's getting closer. My palms are sweating. I only have a few minutes to find a key in the darkness and escape before I'm devoured by genetically modified wolves. I blurt out a very Minnesotan, "Oh jeez," as someone—or something—pounds on the flimsy metal door. Jim Llewellyn and Alex Reece laugh; it's just another day in Orlando for them.

They are the founders of America's Escape Game, one of the handful of franchised escape rooms and among the most polished in the nascent industry. Of course polish is subjective, but when the Orlando Business Journal named them one of the top attractions in Orlando, it put the strip-mall location in contention with some of the biggest global names in entertainment.

So what is an escape room? For the uninitiated, it's essentially a big room you pay to get into and hope you're smart enough to get out of. Getting out involves puzzles, word games and logic. A little fearless curiosity that keeps you from saying, "No, I don't want to stick my hand into that dark hole" helps too.

The craze started in Japan in 2007, and since then has grown to more than 1,800 units worldwide.

Reece and Llewellyn founded America's Escape Game in 2015 with three rooms and a small staff, adding two rooms in 2016 and are working on another for this year. And while the business has grown to now two locations and a licensed operation with Marriott, they've been honing the systems behind the scenes.

At the heart is mission control, a monitoring station of sorts awash in dim blue light from various computer screens. The room is staffed by "escape artists"—game monitors who watch via multiple cameras in each room, guiding customers with predetermined clues.

"Have you guys tried taking a closer look at those gas masks?" asks Albert Patrick, a manager.

"Does anything come apart there?"

The group figures out the next step, but it's ultimately fruitless. The group—which happens to be some prospective employees—fails to escape the room. So there aren't any new escape artists, but maybe a front desk worker or two or an “accomplice.”

In general, the demographics skew toward women (50-60 percent) ages 18 to 45. “We think it's because they're more intelligent,” said Llewellyn with a laugh. “They want to do things that are wholesome for their family or their date. The guys are like, hey let's go to the sports bar. The women say no, no, no, let's do something intellectually stimulating.”

But beyond those core demographics, the concept draws couples, birthday parties looking for something brainy and families who generally struggle to find fun for everyone.

“We had a guy who left one of the games who said, I'm really glad you guys opened because I can't find anything to do with my 18-year-old and my younger kids,” said Reece.

In the last year, more than 50,000 people poured through rooms like “Crisis at 1600,” the wolf-infested room “The Caretaker,” “The Lost Tomb of Monthu” and head-to-head puzzle challenge room “Face Off.” At an average of \$26 per person, the location pulled in more than \$1.3 million in gross revenue, according to a 2016 franchise disclosure document.

The two former toy industry executives see dollar signs, but they're taking time to get things right to guard against an inevitable bubble in the new industry.

“Do I think there will be a peak? Yeah I do, but the better players will stay in it, just like laser tag arenas or bounce houses,” said Reece. “That's why we've taken a very slow approach to this.”

That means high production value relative to the industry. After experiencing a couple escape rooms, it's clear it's a low-barrier “me-too” industry. Shoddy gizmos, low-tech solutions and Spartan dry-walled rooms are an industry motif.

But America's Escape Game looks more like a theme-park attraction. And it's clear why the rooms take “thousands of hours” of development to get just right.

Unexpected revenue



Each room is filled with thematic props and everything could be a piece of the puzzle. Does that gas mask hold a hidden key? Is there a code within the map? How can the hieroglyphics help us escape?

One unexpected revenue stream came from the surrounding convention centers and corporate headquarters in Orlando. "We didn't plan on any team-building corporate business, but now it's 40 percent of our business," said Reece. "Corporate activity is actually our biggest priority now because it's off peak time. Our Fridays are easy to fill. Our Saturdays are easy to fill, our off peak time is in the middle of the day."

Llewellyn said they're also working with psychologists to deliver a detailed write-up for corporate clients to quantify leadership skills, collaboration and everything else necessary among teams.

It's another revenue stream for America's Escape Game, and something beyond the dull role-plays that typically define team building.

"They're looking for something stimulating to do with their staff that isn't a happy hour," said Llewellyn.

Though after a run in with terrorists or ancient aliens, a happy hour might be necessary to calm the nerves.



Founders Alex Reece (left) and Jim Llewellyn jumped into the industry, hoping to bring polish to a burgeoning "me-too" niche.