

The Chains of Change – An Escape Zoom Game

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From the Certificate Track in Transformative Game Design at Uppsala University 2023-2024:

Game design document for

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Type of role-playing game: A kind of larp nano-game you play online via Zoom or a similar service.

Story: You have been imprisoned in a mysterious magical prison (which looks like the room you play the game in). Someone has accused you of crimes that you may or may not be guilty of, but at least you realize you have done things that someone considers to be a crime. Something has just changed in the way the prison works; you can now see other prisoners (the other players) in other cells. The game begins when you get contact with the other prisoners. By interacting with them, you may find your own way out of imprisonment. You can perhaps escape both mentally and physically.

Amount of Players: 3-6.

Length: 40-70 minutes.

Target population: Youth and adults.

Purpose of the game: Apart from playing a (perhaps) fun game, where imagination is an important component: Taking a step towards breaking imaginary shackles you yourself and/or society has put upon you.

Game mastering: This version of the game should be considered to have an “expansion pack” included. In this version of the game, someone acts as a game master (GM), and describes invisible traps and other obstacles that the prisoners face. The GM must also explain the game to the players, lead a workshop and lead a debrief. The GM plays an artificial intelligence who has access to the main computer in the prison, and thus can tell the prisoners of invisible obstacles. The GM explains that what that character says during the game happens in the fiction, and the players need to react to those things.

Props: Using special costumes and props at home is encouraged, but not mandatory.

Pre-game workshop:

Safety design: The GM starts by explaining that anyone can name subject matter they do not want the other players to bring up in the game. Also mention that anyone can opt out of the game during runtime. Explain the safety technique “The Lookdown” (see for example this page: <https://nordiclarp.org/2016/09/09/creating-culture-trust-safety-calibration-larp-mechanics/>).

Then do at least one **verbal warm-up exercise**. This one is recommended:

Someone says “I’m a *SOMETHING* trapped in a *SOMETHING*” (for example: “I’m a mouse trapped in a cage.”).

Another person says “You can escape by *DOING THIS*” (for example: “using your telekinesis to bend the bars”). Then that person continues by saying “I’m a *SOMETHING* trapped in a *SOMETHING*”.

Continue at a brisk pace until everyone has said someone can escape at least 3 times. (Note that this is just a warm-up, and not the actual character creation for the game.)

Then ask the players to close their eyes, for a kind of **guided meditation exercise**:

Ask: “In what ways do you feel society hinders you from being your true self?”

“Do you feel imprisoned by society in some way?”

“It could also be small things that annoy you or hold you back.”

“Are these things just imaginary shackles?”

“Could you break free of them?”

“Should you break free of them?”

“Do you feel that you have put some imaginary shackles on yourself? Have you created a prison of your own making?”

“If your life was a movie, how would the characters break free of the shackles?”

(You may add more improvisation around the instructions below, as you see fit.)

“Now, think of something that you feel is imprisoning you or holding you back, and imagine that thing coming towards you slowly in the form of an invisible wall. What do you do?”

“Try pushing the wall away. How much do you have to struggle to make it move in another direction?”

“You can now open your eyes. Try pushing back another wall. Now, think of it as if you were a mime artist. How would it then look if you pushed the wall?”

“A wall is coming towards you again. This time, check if you could step beside the wall and squeeze past it instead. Maybe there are several walls coming.”

“Is there a difference between pushing back the wall and stepping beside the wall?”

Make them try out The Lookdown Technique during the exercise.

Then move on to **character creation**:

The participants come up with their own characters. You could play anything from a god to a normal human, and your alleged crimes could be anything from complete world conquest to not having time to turn in a paper for school. But the game is not meant to tackle actual crime in today’s society (for example gang criminality in today’s Sweden), so one should stay clear of that. Your alleged crimes should be more made up, and they can, if you like, be things that are in no way punishable in a Western judicial system (for example: procrastination, being too introverted, being too extroverted).

Before the role-playing begins, you also need to decide for yourself (and later reveal during the game):

- Who imprisoned you? (It could be yourself or some societal pressure, if you like.)
- How do you feel about being imprisoned?
- What are your alleged crimes?
- Apart from breaking free from the physical prison, what imaginary shackles do you need to break free from?

Tell everyone that, in the game, it is only mandatory that their characters steer for breaking free from imaginary shackles put upon themselves by society or themselves. It is not mandatory for the players to use things they themselves need to break free from. But they are very welcome to use those things if they feel it is appropriate.

Give them at least 5 minutes to decide who they want to play (and perhaps get costumes and props). You may remind them of the questions above.

Game mechanics and ending the game:

Choose a maximum amount of minutes the game may take. Set a timer.

When the game has started, discuss your situation with the other prisoners. Remember that you play to create a meaningful role-play experience for everyone; it's not about winning the game or escaping from prison faster than everyone else or trying to make it as difficult as possible for the others to escape. Therefore, it is recommended that the characters, at least in some way, are supportive of the other prisoners' attempts to escape.

To escape your cell, you need to

- use at least 3 verbal ideas from other prisoners,
- and you need to come to the realization that you, in one way or another, is partly responsible for your own imprisonment.
- Before you escape, you also have to verbalize how the character will try to live life differently.

Once you have role-played these things, you can choose to escape your cell however you feel is fitting within the fiction. It is recommended that you don't escape as fast as you possibly can. Stay in the game and support the other players' role-playing until the runtime is nearing its end; then everyone narrates their own version of breaking free. You may also opt to stay in the prison.

The GMs role during runtime (don't read this to the players):

Help the characters with their escape, as you see fit.

At an appropriate moment, describe that invisible walls start appearing, as in the workshop.

Help the players realize what the walls and the movements represent, preferably psychologically.

Then add other invisible obstacles, to make it more surprising.

Improvise around these concepts as you see fit. For example:

Have a wall move from one cell to another. Have the prisoners help each other.

Have a wall become an invisible creature.

Have an invisible shrinking box capture the players (you can have the boxes align with the actual computer frames).

Add the possibility of shattering walls completely.

Debrief:

The GM announces that the game is over and asks everyone to leave their roles behind by moving in some way of the GMs choice in the room.

Ask "How was the experience of playing? Everyone must get a turn answering the questions, but it is voluntary to answer."

"It is sometimes known as 'emancipatory bleed' when you have a feeling of breaking free after a game. Do you feel that the game inspired you to break free from some oppression?"

"Do you feel that the game inspired you to break free from some prison of your own making? That is, breaking free from unnecessary boundaries you have put upon yourself."

"Do you feel that the game inspired you to identify obstacles in your life, and plan for dealing with them?"