

How to create digital
educational escape rooms



VIRTUAL ESCAPE ROOM GUIDE AND PLATFORM MANUAL

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1) Escape Rooms

a) Physical Escape Rooms

Escape rooms are games, created to be played by teams of players in order to solve diverse puzzles and riddles and reach the final goal of the game, usually the way out of a locked room or the game site - hence their name. They usually feature a specific theme or plot and require to be solved inside a limited timeframe. Escape rooms are built in a way that immerses the player to the story through various physical factors such as lighting, decoration, objects and sounds that can aid the players in the solution of the puzzles, or act as a diversion to make the game more challenging.

The creators of physical escape rooms leverage the physicality of the game to create the immersion needed to make it appealing to the players and have a major variety of choices available for the creation of the puzzles, diversions, as well as the room itself. For example, they can:

- Dim or brighten the lights of the room to shape the atmosphere and feelings of the players.
- Scatter objects of interest in the game site, hide them inside secret places and make the players physically search the room to solve the puzzle.
- Use light or sound signals to aid in riddles, as well as devices for files or media, such as smartphones or laptops.
- Use human actors to oversee the room, provide hints, or act as a diversion when needed.
- Provide the freedom of communication to the players through speaking or diminish it by forbidding them to speak from the game's rules, or permitting them to speak only through specific channels.
- Use physics attributes such as the behavior of liquids, electricity, or magnetism.
- Decorate the room appropriately to fit the theme and the plot of the story, conform the clues and red herrings accordingly, and make the players feel part of the story itself.

b) From the physical to the virtual space

It is obvious that the escape rooms gain a lot of positive elements from the physicality standpoint. However, in the case of virtual escape rooms there is several physical elements that we can carry with us to the virtual space through slight changing, and others that cannot be transcended to the virtual world.

In the virtual world, we are stripped off the elements of space. This means that actions such as lighting, decoration, attributes of physics and human actors are off limits for potential virtual escape room creators. However, there is a number of aspects where we can create virtual equivalents to aid in the virtual escape room creation.

Communication

The first and foremost part of the creation of escape rooms in general, is communication. As team games, the players are supposed to communicate effectively, exchange clues and ideas, divide tasks and collaborate to reach the final goal of the room. In physical escape rooms, the communication aspect is straightforward as players coexist in the same room, and can talk with no problems, except if the game rules reduce their ability to do so. In the virtual space however, there is several ways to provide a communication channel. The virtual escape room could provide a texting chat, a voice chat, a video conference mechanic, or some other custom way of allowing the player to communicate, collaborate and exchange clues and ideas.

Time constraint

Escape rooms are usually time bound. The players are not given an infinite time to solve the room, they are supposed to reach the ending within a specific timeframe, defined by the room creator.

In physical escape rooms, this is not a challenging issue. A timer must be started once the players start the game, and once the timer runs out, an overseer of the game should decide whether the team managed to solve the room in time or not.

A similar mechanic should be added in the virtual space, a timer that starts from the moment the player enters the virtual space where the escape room takes place. There is a caveat that comes with the digital spaces though, and that is that players

could leave the platform or experience network issues at any moment. There is no predefined way to deal with such issues, and players could opportunistically leverage

such behaviors to gain more time to solve the problem. However, the norm of players that want to experience the game fairly should challenge themselves to solve the puzzles in time, avoiding such behaviors and challenge the whole room again in the case that they fail to find the solution in time.

Story and Plot

Creating an immersive and captivating story is a must for escape room creation. The title and description of the room is the first thing that should lure players into trying to solve the escape room, and that's true in both the virtual and physical space.

Carefully writing the story, its progression and its plot is instrumental to the construction of the escape room, and clues, diversions, riddles and puzzles and even hints should conform to the patterns of the story to create an immersion that catches the players' interest and triggers specific emotions. In horror rooms, the primal emotion is fear and urgency, in investigative rooms the primal emotion is curiousness and mysteriousness etc.

Especially in the case of virtual escape rooms, where physical factors such as lighting and decoration are not at play, a well-written story as well as the use of elements that are aligned with it keeps the players in the game, drives their curiosity and triggers their emotions, leading to a great experience.

Clues and Diversions

Clues and diversions form the most substantial part of an escape room along with the puzzles they take part into. In the physical escape room, they are objects, information spread through mediums (e.g. sound) or given from the creator, and even files within electronic devices. The creators benefit from the physicality of the space, so they are able to scatter them across the game site, hide them or place them inside spaces that need to be opened from the players. Finally, they can also provide hints on demand whenever the players ask for them, in order to further aid them on the solution of the room.

In the virtual space the physicality is not present, however, the creators can perform certain actions that emulate the behaviors above. In the ELMET platform, for example, the clues and elements of the room, take the form of notes, and they can be a text, an image, a video, or a link to any internet resource. These notes appear on the spectrum of a canvas where they can be freely moved by the creator and the players. This provides an opportunity for scattering of the clues by putting them in various places of the canvas, and layering by putting them behind other notes, thus emulating the hiding of a clue inside a drawer, or behind a miscellaneous object.

Hints can either be provided on demand or automatically. The “on-demand” solution demands an overseer of the game which is usually very difficult to achieve in a virtual environment, while the automatic way - which we have adopted in the platform - uses factors such as the time that’s left on the level to provide the players with new hints. The creator must take the difficulty of the challenge into consideration and provide the players with hints accordingly, as well as inform them of the overall difficulty on the escape room description.

Finally, a common issue that physical escape room creators have to deal with is the potential damage of objects and devices that are put in the escape room. Players tinker with the equipment in order to solve the problem, and that sometimes leads to breaking the mentioned equipment, a problem that does not appear in the virtual world and provides more freedom to the virtual room creators.

Riddles and Puzzles

Riddles and puzzles are the challenges that players must face in order to reach the final goal of the game. In that aspect, the virtual and the physical escape rooms behave differently.

Physical escape rooms are usually general knowledge games, and for whatever puzzles that require specific knowledge, usually an explanatory paper or a resource is provided to the players.

Virtual escape rooms, however, reside on the vastest resource of information, the internet, with a plethora of tools available at any time, access to almost any knowledge base and useful search tools. That allows creators to construct more challenging puzzles, layer them more, and expect the players to leverage those tools in order to solve the escape room.

A simple example is the Morse system, a usual technique used to obfuscate information in escape rooms. In the physical case, the creator should have to provide the players with a paper explaining the pairing of letters and symbols, so that they can decrypt the information. They would have to go letter by letter in order to decrypt it and gain the information that is hidden. In the virtual case, the solution is as simple as copying the written format of the morse code and pasting it into a Morse code converter internet tool, saving a lot more time than the physical case.

The immense variety of information and tools that exist in the web allows for more complex challenges, omission of needed resources that could potentially give away the solution, interesting challenges with tools that exist only in the virtual space and easier usage of multimedia resources, which tend to be a challenge in physical escape rooms.

Linearity and Multilinearity

The challenges presented in the spectrum of an escape room can be linear or multilinear. In the case of a linear room, the different puzzles follow a progress pipeline, in which players must solve a puzzle to move to the next one, paving their way to the final puzzle that completes the room. In multilinear rooms, the progress is not standardized, as players are presented with a plethora of clues from the start, that are related to different puzzles which can be solved in no particular order in order to solve the room.

Virtual escape rooms can adopt both styles of escape room solution progress, albeit the easier and more intuitive is the linear style. Players get clues regarding the next challenge only if the previous one is solved, usually with ascending difficulty, and that creates a better sense of a target at hand for the players and makes the job of the creator easier than with complex multilinear rooms. In linear rooms, the procedure of giving and asking for hints is easier as well, as the players always have a specific task to deal with in each “level” of the room, and the hints are easier to be automatically given to them in the virtual space with no game master present.

c) Conclusion

Summarizing the information, we can define a number of elements that virtual escape room creators - as well as virtual escape room platform developers - have to take into consideration for the creation of a well-balanced, intuitive, entertaining virtual escape room, with adjusted difficulty.

- Making sure that players have both a way and a need to communicate in order to solve the puzzles, prioritizing the team collaboration.
- Writing a well-constructed and appealing story and shaping each part of the escape room in a way that aligns with the story and aids in the immersion and progression of its plot.
- Adding clues through multimedia resources and red herrings (diversions), pushing the players to organizing, communicating, and following the appropriate route to the solution.
- Utilizing internet tools for the creation of the puzzles as well as acknowledging their potential of helping the players solve challenges. If a tool is not well-known, the creator should give hints to their usage (e.g., with the use of an encryption technique).
- Binding the room or the specific levels to a timeframe, to create a sense of urgency for the players, adjusted to the difficulty of the room, which needs to be also known from the players from the room description or title.
- Creating intuitive linear puzzles with enough clues to be solved, but also providing automatic hints that appear after a specific amount of time depending on the difficulty of the challenge.

2) The ELMET Platform

a) Objective

The ELMET platform aims at offering an easy and convenient way to create and use digital escape room for all trainers who desires to apply the methodology of the educational Escape Rooms to support their courses.

b) Access

The ELMET project platform is currently in the beta testing phase. To access the platform, users must navigate to <https://elmet.e-ce.uth.gr>, using their favorite web browser.

Google Chrome provides better support for the platform's features and is highly recommended for a better experience.

c) Registration

In order to experience the ELMET platform and its features, users should create their own user account in the platform. To do that, the following steps must be followed:

1. After navigating to the platform in the web browser, click on **Register** on the top right



Login Register



ELMET Project

In today's labor markets, which are living exponential transformations that have a cross-cutting impact on practically all sectors and occupations, continuous training, c-VET, becomes a key tool. Training gaps have a quantifiable negative impact on the employment opportunities of workers, and especially in people with a lower educational level, who are exposed to almost twice as likely to be unemployed with the economic and social loss that this implies.

corner.



2. Insert the user information in the input fields provided, check the ELMET privacy policy checkbox, and click submit.

Register

Username

Password Verify password

First Name Last Name

To continue using ELMET, you must consent our Privacy policy
 have read and accept the ELMET Privacy policy



3. A code will appear, which is called OTP (One-Time Password). This code is used to recover a user account if the user forgets their password. This code can be used only once, and after a successful change of user password, this OTP is replaced by a new one for security purposes.

This code should be noted and kept in a secure place, for a potential password reset. The password reset will be explained in the following section.

Click **I noted my OTP!** to finalize the user account creation, and log into the platform.

An One-Time Password has been generated that can be used to reset your account in case you forget your password. Your OTP is:
kR+8ZYX2^u

Please write down the OTP somewhere safe so that it is not lost.

I noted my OTP!

Register

Username

Password Verify password

First Name Last Name

d) Log In

In order to reach the Log In dialogue screen, we click **Login** in the top right corner.



ELMET Project

In today's labor markets, which are living exponential transformations that have a cross-cutting impact on practically all sectors and occupations, continuous training, c-VET, becomes a key tool. Training gaps have a quantifiable negative impact on the employment opportunities of workers, and especially in people with a lower educational level, who are exposed to almost twice as likely to be unemployed with the economic and social loss that this implies.



User Account Login

If we have already created a user account using the method explained in the Registration section, we can log in to our account using the username, and the password we entered.

We enter the username, and password, and click **Login**. In this example, the username and password of the example account created in Registration is used.

Login

Username Password

Remember me

The option **Remember Me** can be checked, if we want the browser to autocomplete the username field with the current choice every time we visit the platform.

Guest Mode

Next to the button **Login**, that we used to log in with a created user account, there is the option **Login as guest**. This option can login a user into the platform as a guest, with limited capabilities.

The guest users will not be able to use the editor for creating new virtual escape rooms and will not be able to participate in Team Play of the available virtual escape rooms.

There is no data saved in the platform in regard to guests' actions, so any escape room the guests play will have to be completed without leaving, otherwise the guest will have to start again from the beginning, since no progress data is saved.

Password Reset

Under the Login buttons, there is the **I forgot my password** button. The user can click this button in situations where login is impossible because the user has forgotten the password to their account.

The platform will ask for the username and the special OTP code mentioned in the Registration section. Filling this information and clicking Submit, will navigate a user into a password reset interface to create a new password and replace the forgotten one.

Please Use the one time reset password you were given on register to be able to reset your password.

Username

One Time Reset Password

Submit

e) Home Screen

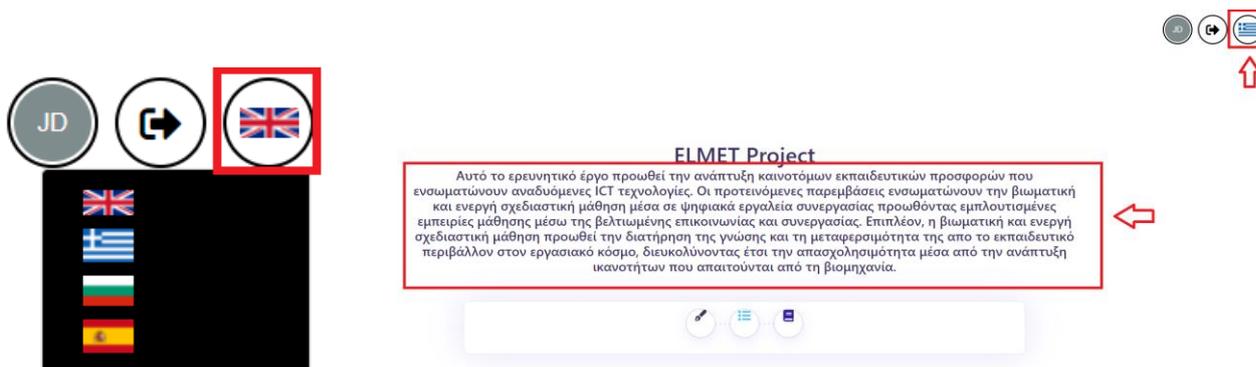
Once the user is logged in, they will be navigated to the Home screen. The home screen is the starting point for any action the user wishes to perform, and consists of four main compartments: the navbar at the top row of the screen, containing the Language Change button, the Log out button, and the User Avatar button, and the three main sections of the platform, indicated with different icons, the virtual escape room editor (pen icon), the escape room list (list icon), and the external too list (book icon).

We can navigate to the home screen from anywhere inside the platform by clicking the ELMET logo at the top left of the screen.



Language Change

At the top right corner of the page, we can see a flag that indicates the language used. When the flag is clicked, the user can see a dropdown of other languages, and choose in order to translate the content of the page to the appropriate language for better accessibility.



Log out

On the left of the language change button, we have the logout button. When clicked, the user leaves his account and logs out of the platform. To go back in, the Login procedure must be followed again.

f) Account Management Dashboard

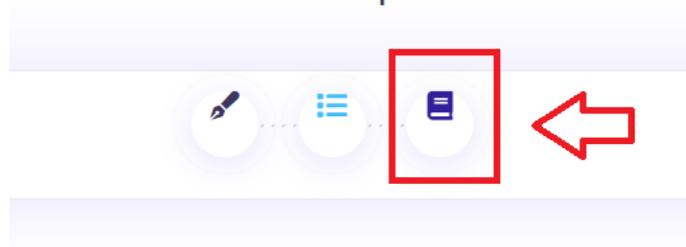
The first icon of the navbar is the user's avatar, a randomly colored circle icon, bearing the initials of the user's first and last name. When clicked, the user is navigated to the user information dashboard, where the user can perform the following actions as marked in the image:

1. Change information such as First Name, Last Name and Username and click **Submit** to save the changes. The *Role* field cannot be changed by the user.
2. Click **Change Password** to create a new password for the account, using the old password as a security authentication measure.
3. Click **Delete Account** to delete the user account completely. **WARNING:** By deleting the account, the user will not be able to log in to the platform anymore, and every saved information associated with the account will be deleted.

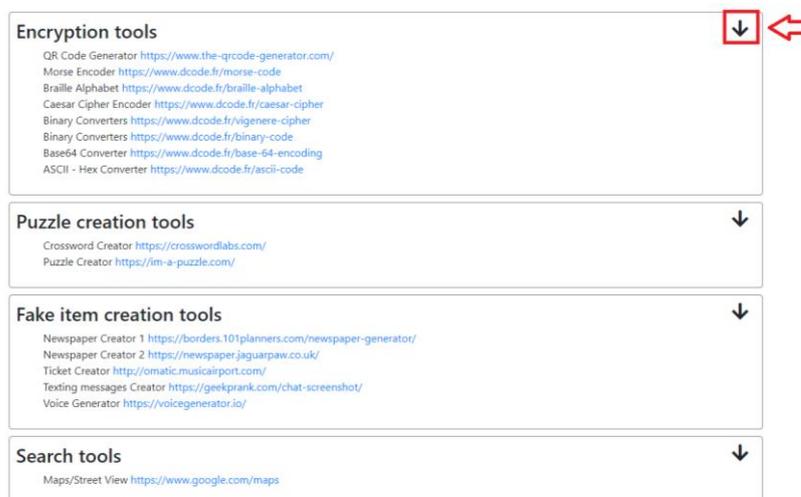
g) External Tools

From the home screen, we can choose the third of the icons (the book icon) to access the External Tools List.

ie employment opportunities of workers, and e
d to almost twice as likely to be unemployed wi
that this implies.



This list consists of several tools, grouped into categories, that can assist in the creation of virtual escape room scenarios, as well as in the solution of such scenarios. We can click the down arrow button on each category to reveal the different tools included in it. The user can click on the links to visit the different tools.



A quick summary of the current external tools offered is presented below:

1. Encryption Tools:

- a. **QR Code Generator:** This tool helps create a QR code from a file or a link that players can scan with their phones to find clues or use the same tool as a web-based scanner of QR codes.
- b. **Morse encoder:** A tool that can encode and decode information to morse code format and in reverse.
- c. **Braille alphabet:** A tool that can encode and decode information to braille alphabet format (a touch-based writing and reading system used by blind persons) and in reverse.
- d. **Caesar Cipher Encoder:** A tool that encrypts and decrypts information using the most easy and well-known cryptographic system, the Caesar cipher, which is a shift cipher.
- e. **Vigenère cipher:** A tool that encrypts and decrypts information using the Vigenère cipher.
- f. **Binary converter:** A tool that converts integers to binary format and in reverse.
- g. **Base64 converter:** A tool that converts information to base64 format and in reverse.
- h. **ASCII - hex converter:** A tool that converts ascii characters (normal text) to the hexadecimal system and in reverse.

2. Puzzle Creation Tools:

- a. Crossword Creator: A tool that allows the user to create crosswords, using custom questions and answers. The user can then input the crossword image from the external tool in order to include it in a virtual escape room scenario.
- b. Puzzle Creator: A tool that allows the user to create puzzles, using custom images. The user can then provide a link to the puzzle from the external tool in order to include it in a virtual escape room scenario.

3. Fake Item Creation Tools:

- a. Newspaper Creator 1 & 2: Two tools that enable the user to create fake newspapers and highlight fake news in the main part of the newspaper as a clue to players. The user can then input the image to the scenario to use it.
- b. Fake Ticket Creator: A tool for creating fake airplane tickets. The user can get the link of the image to include it into the scenario.
- c. Texting Messages Creator: A tool for creating fake mobile messaging conversations. The user can import the image to the scenario to use it as a clue.
- d. Voice Generator: A tool that is used to create a voice message from text.

4. Search Tools

- a. Google Maps: Global maps, with information about points of interest, street view and other interesting features that can be leveraged to create realistic scenarios.

h) Editor

To create a new virtual escape room, the user needs to navigate to the virtual escape room editor interface. To do that click on the pen icon button in the home screen.

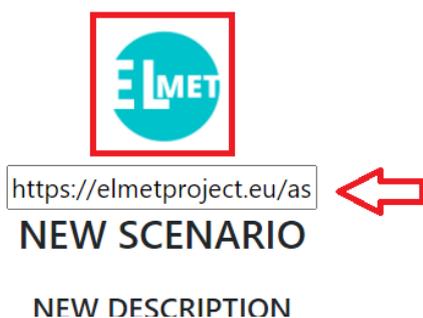
ELMET Project

markets, which are living exponential transformations that have a cross-cutting impact on the employment opportunities of workers, and especially in people who are exposed to almost twice as likely to be unemployed with the economic crisis that this implies.



Icon, Title and Description

At the top of the editor interface, we can see the thumbnail of the virtual escape room scenario. The default thumbnail is the logo of the ELMET project.



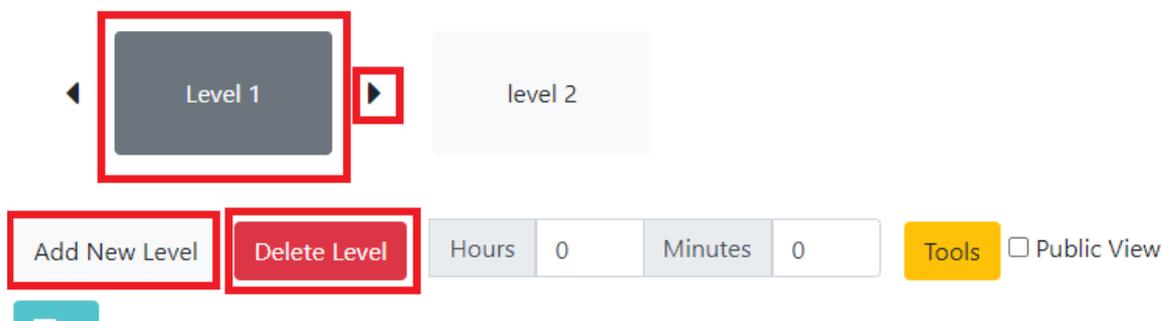
To change that, we must **double-click** on the image for the link text input to appear. Then, we can paste a link to the image we want to use as a thumbnail for the scenario, and press **Enter** to save.



We can change the title, and the description of the scenario in the same way. We **double-click** the title or the description, enter the text of our liking and press **Enter** to save.

Levels

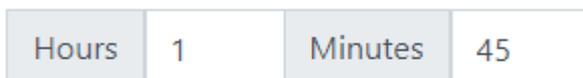
Further below, we can see some options pertaining to the levels of the escape room. The levels are in visible blocks and clicking on them will give the user a different canvas each time.



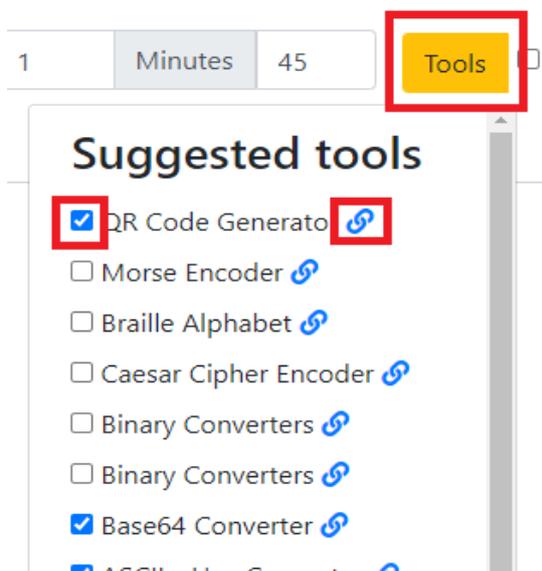
The current level the user is working on is colored gray to differentiate from the other levels. The levels can be reordered by the arrows left and right of the current level. Since the virtual escape rooms are linear, the order of the levels plays a significant role into creating the best possible experience. The user can add a new level at the end of the levels list by clicking **Add New Level**. By clicking **Delete Level**, the user can delete the currently selected level.

Timers

The scenario creators can author levels with or without time constrains. By default, there is no timer set to run in a level. However, by changing the numbers in the **Hours** and **Minutes** field, the creator can initiate a time countdown on the level the user is playing to make it a timed challenge.



Tools



The tools analyzed in the External Tools section can be accessed from this screen as well, as a quick view is provided to the scenario creator, along with links and checkboxes for the creator to mark the ones used.

To access the quick view list, click on the yellow button **Tools**.

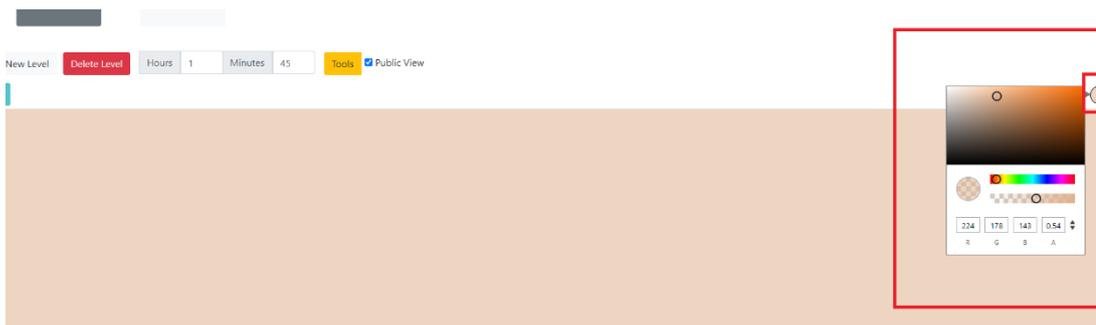
Finally, by checking the box **Public View**, the created scenario becomes publicly available for other users to join and play in single or team player mode.



Canvas

The main part of the virtual escape room scenario editor is the canvas. The canvas is the workspace where multimedia notes are created in order to create clues, information, distractions, or any other vital part of the escape room scenario.

The canvas color at each level can change freely by using the color pick tool at the right side of the canvas.



The button at the left-hand side of the canvas (note icon with a plus + sign) is the one used to create notes. The notes can be the following:

1. Text note: A note containing text, the default option.
 - a. The text of the note can be written in the text area.
 - b. The color pick tool can be used to change the text color of the note.
 - c. The Hint checkbox can be checked to turn this note into a hint for the players. Hints appear to the players after a set number of minutes, in order to help them if they are stuck with the challenges.
 - d. A background image for the text note can be set, either by providing a link to an image and pasting it to the **URL** field, or by uploading the image by clicking **Choose File**.
 - e. At the bottom the creator is presented with the following buttons:
 - Button to the image note creation.
 - Button to the video note creation.
 - Button to the progress note creation.
 - Button to save the current note.
 - Button to leave from the note creation interface



2. Image Note: A note containing an image.
 - a. The image can have a text legend above it to explain its content.
 - b. The text legend can have a specific text color.

- c. The image as before can be uploaded from the local system or linked.
- d. The image note can be used as a hint as explained before.

The screenshot shows a configuration interface for an image note. It includes the following elements:

- 2a**: A text input field labeled "Legend of the image" with a red box around it.
- 2b**: A circular color selection button with a red box around it.
- 2c**: A file selection area with a "Choose File" button, the text "No file chosen", and a red box around the entire area.
- 2d**: A hint configuration section with a "Hint" checkbox and a text input field "Appears after (m) min:", with a red box around the entire section.

3. Video Note: A note containing a video.

- a. The video can be linked using its URL (e.g. from YouTube)
- b. The video can be used as a hint as explained before.

The screenshot shows a configuration interface for a video note. It includes the following elements:

- 3a**: A text input field containing a YouTube URL: "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ" with a red box around it.
- 3b**: A hint configuration section with a "Hint" checkbox and a text input field "Appears after (m) min:", with a red box around the entire section.

4. Progress Note: A note that presents the player with a question and expects a specific answer, defined by the scenario creator. If the player answers correctly, the next level will be unlocked. This way linear progress is ensured in the virtual escape room.

- a. The first text area is used to provide a question to the player, the answer of which will let or not let the player progress on the scenario.
- b. The next text area is used to provide the expected answer. This is hidden from the player, but it will be used by the platform to judge the correctness of the answer.
- c. A background image for the progress note can be set as explained before.

Question for the player **4a**

Expected answer **4b**

Background Image **4c**

Choose File No file chosen

URL

Examples of a text note, an image note, a video note and a progress note are show below.



These notes can be moved freely inside the boundaries of the canvas and the canvas itself can expand vertically if we try to move a note below the lower bound of the canvas, providing more space.

Hovering over a note will present us with options for the selected note. The options are:

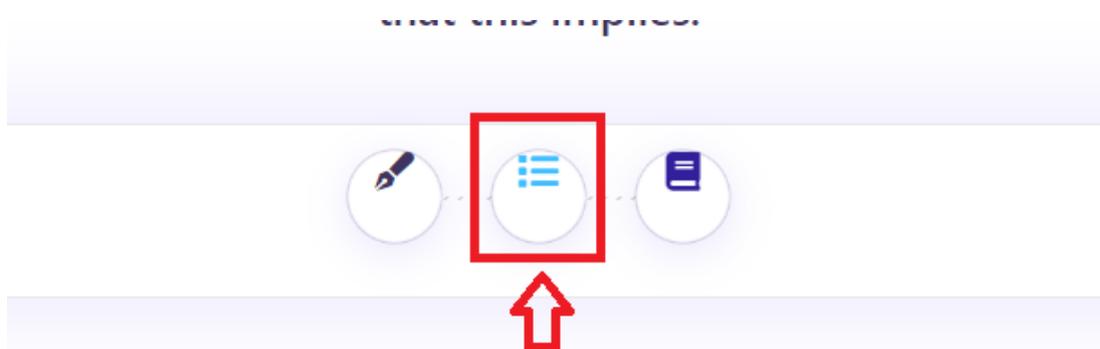
1. Edit the note.
2. Delete the note.
3. Copy to create a new identical note above it.
4. Change the height for the note to appear below or above others when occupying the same coordinates, with the note with the bigger height appearing above the note with the smaller height.



Using these features and utilities and pairing them with a well thought out scenario and the use of the external tools suggested by the platform can create a very interesting virtual escape room scenario, and provide a great learning and entertaining experience for the players.

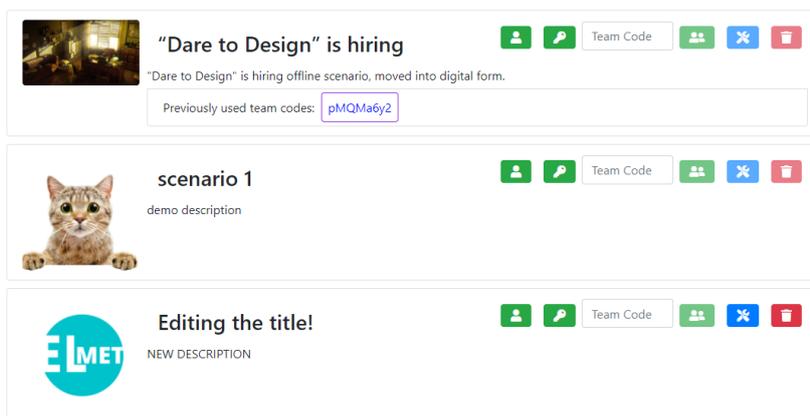
i) Escape Room List

The editor automatically saves our actions into a new escape room scenario. These scenarios that we have created (private or public), along with public scenarios that other creators have created are all available at the escape room list interface. To navigate there, we need to return to the home screen and press the middle list icon button.



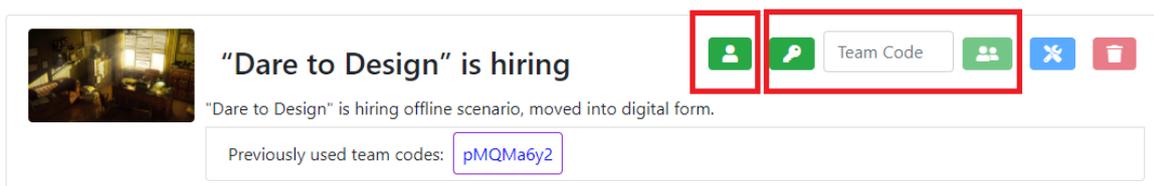
The interface of the escape room list is simple and consists of every privately owned scenario created by the user, and all public scenarios. Each scenario is presented by its thumbnail, title, description, possible team codes that have been used by the user for team play in the past (will be explained in the Team Play subsection) and a set of buttons for simple utilities.

1. The green buttons and the team code text input are used for playing the escape rooms, so they will be explained in the next section.
2. The blue button can be used only for private scenarios of the user, in order to navigate to the Editor interface for editing the virtual escape room scenario.
3. The red button can be used only for private scenarios of the user, in order to delete the virtual escape room scenario.



j) Playing the Escape Rooms

As explained before, the green buttons are used in order to play the virtual escape room, as a player. The first button is used to engage into single player mode, and the other two green buttons along with the team code text input are used in order to engage in team play mode.s



Single Player Mode

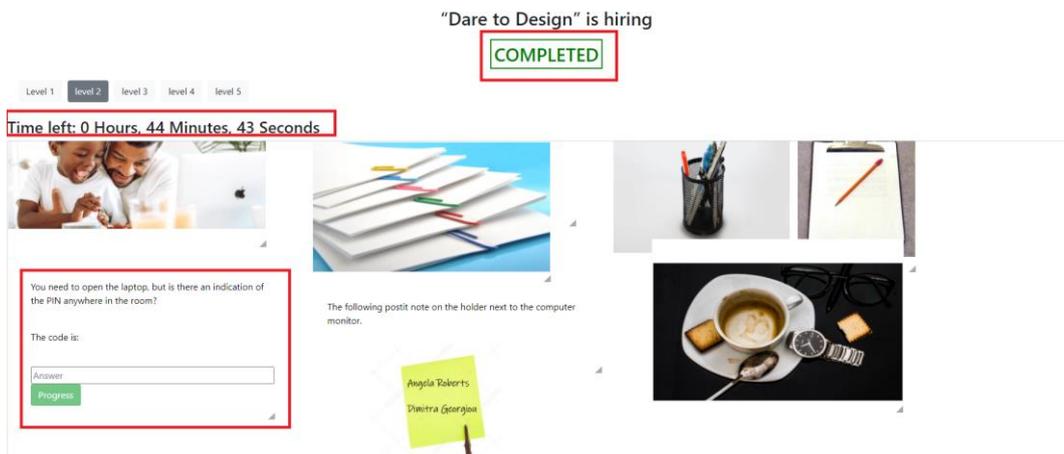
In the single player mode, the player is tackling the escape room scenario alone.

When starting the single player mode of a scenario, the user can only see the first level, but any progress beyond the first level will be saved from the platform. Successfully completed escape rooms will load in the last level with an indication **Completed**.

As we can also see, if the level is timed, the player has a time countdown above the canvas, and must proceed to the next level before the time has run out.

Hint notes and progress notes play a significant role for the player. If a hint note exists, the player will only see it after a time set by the creator has passed. That way, a useful idea or clue might appear before the players and empower them to progress to the next level.

Progression is handled with the progress notes. As we can see in the image below, the progress note has the question and a text input for the answer to the question. The button **Progress** is not clickable until the answer in the text field is the expected one. By clicking **Progress**, the player can move on to the next level.



The player also has access to a chat. Because this is the single player mode, no other player is participating in the chat, but it might come in handy to the player as a quick notebook.

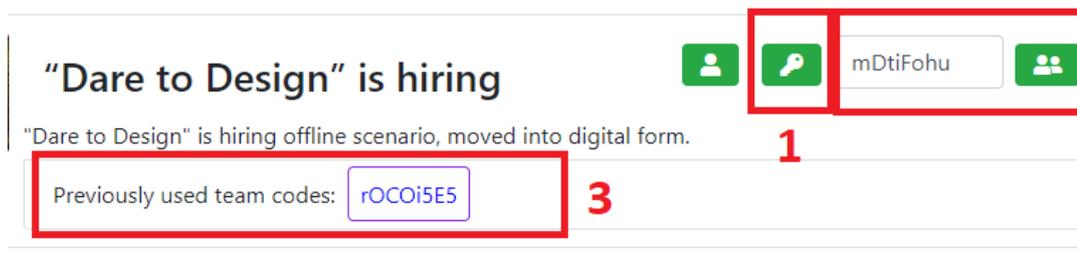


Team Play Mode

The team play mode is the mode where the escape room is tackled by multiple people belonging in the same team. Teams are defined by **team codes**. In order to engage into team play mode we can do one of the following:

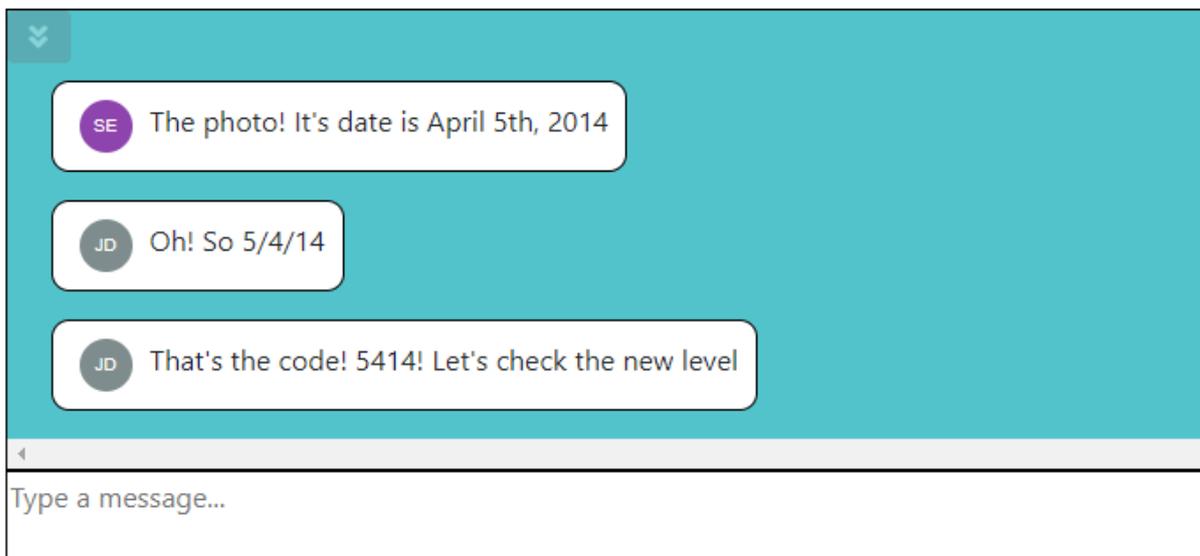
1. Create a new team by clicking the key button to receive a new code. The user can share this code with any other user so that they can join the same team.
2. Join an existing team, by pasting a known someone has shared with the user, in order to join that team.
3. Using a previously used team code, to rejoin a team that we have participated with in the past, by clicking on the team code we want from the list below the escape room description.

Once we have a code, we can click the green button with the icon of people in order to enter the escape room in team play mode.



Once the user is participating in the escape scenario team play mode, the procedure is very similar to the single player mode, the players work on their own instances, and must provide their own answers to the progress notes. However, the chat is shared between the members. That way, the

team members can communicate clues, ideas, and solutions with each other in order to progress successfully together.



k) Final notes

This manual concludes the features and functionality of the beta testing version of the ELMET platform. It is a work in progress, and is updated often, with new features, changes or bug fixes. Any inquiries or reports about bugs or unexpected behavior can be sent to the following email addresses:

1. Sotiris Evangelou - Developer of the platform - swtevag@gmail.com
2. Olivier Heidmann - Project Manager of the platform - olivier.heidmann@gmail.com