

Making the game

Research

Before anything, I wanted to know what it was like to be in an adventure game, so I waited until Lisa ran her adventure game. Some things I took note of during Lisa's game:

- › Prepping for the adventure was done in character
- › Whenever you have to discuss something out of character, the email is appropriately labeled "out of character"
- › A lot of improvisation goes on with adventure games – I asked Lisa how much of our adventure went according to plan, and it turned out to be something like 60%.
- › Modular rooms: when creating maps, it's better to have rooms that are modular. This helps in situations where your adventurers get themselves in situations that were totally different from what you had planned. That way, it's easy to just say "yeah sure that door totally leads to this room."

Brainstorming

When I brainstormed about what I wanted my adventure to be about, I thought about the kinds of stories that I wanted to tell. I have always had a fascination with spy movies and black ops, so I figured it would be a good area to cover.

My first idea was to have a game where everyone was invited to a party, but were also covert agents. People would have "secret objectives" that other players didn't know about. However, after giving it some thought, I decided to scrap the idea of an adventure about secrecy and deception because I realized that it would be almost impossible to hide your ulterior motives from other players (everything you do in an adventure game is declared, so how can you do anything in secret?)

So I decided to go with a simpler storyline, where I had everyone working together to achieve a common goal.

Planning

When planning my adventure, I first wrote down a list of everything that I thought was interesting and exciting about spy movies. The list included...

- › Code names and secret identities
- › Fancy gadgets and guns
- › Finding double agents

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- › Big explosions
- › Vehicle sequences
- › Stealth
- › Saving the world
- › Going to fancy parties with a secret agenda
- › Satellite imagery
- › Night vision
- › Secret agent intuition

So with that in mind, I set on creating my adventure.

I started by thinking about what skills I wanted to give my characters. I came up with this list:

- › Demolitions
- › Negotiation
- › Gunplay
- › Concealment
- › Hacking
- › Clout
- › Lockpicking

But then I realized that I wanted to give the group a chance to personalize their character. So, instead, I sent an email:

Greetings, Recruits. Welcome to The Agency.

Before you receive your first assignment, you will need to fill out some paperwork.
Please provide us with the following information by 2008-MAR-13 0800 GMT-0500.

Code Name:
Height:
Weight:
Specialty:
Previous Occupation:

Further information to follow.

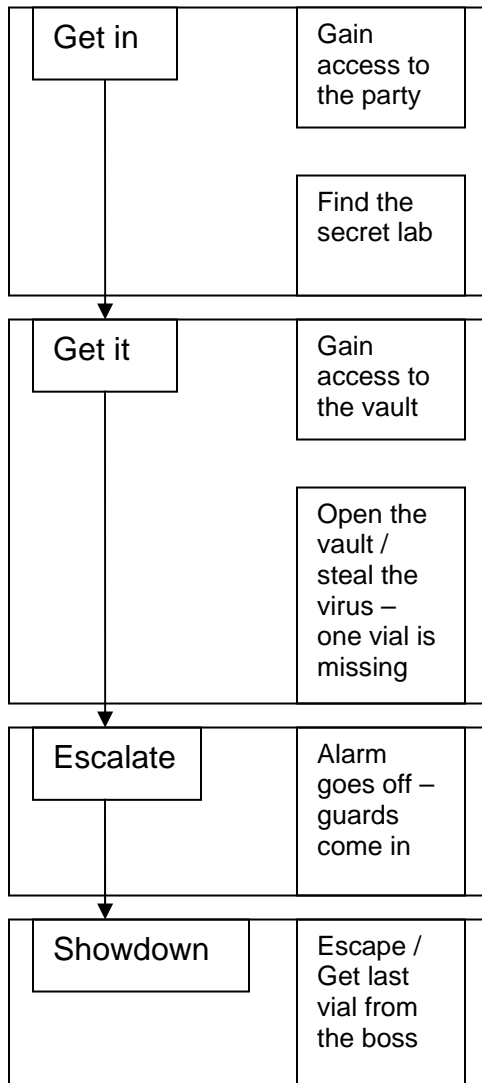
Chessman

After everyone replied with their specialization, I used the information in their application form to create character sheets (see Appendix A). Once everyone had their characters, I was now able to tailor an experience that took advantage of everyone's skills.

I came up with a basic story and sequence of events that I wanted to follow. I didn't get too specific with the events, since I figured that people would want to get creative with their solutions. Instead, I created a couple of sub-goals and

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scenarios that I wanted to hit, and just bounced around ideas of how the team *could* solve them. The basic structure I came up with was:



Then, I added some constraints to the situation...

- › The secret lab is located somewhere on the top floor of a building. This will make getting in and getting out more interesting.
- › The secret lab is only accessible via a single elevator. I can force an elevator lockdown if needed, in order to force the players towards the roof area.
- › The building is equipped with AA guns, so the team is forced to enter from the ground, and they will have to disable the guns before they can chopper out. They can also use the AA guns to shoot down enemy helicopters.

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After that, I just held my breath and hoped for the best. Lisa said that you really shouldn't plan too much, because players just end up doing things completely differently from what you expect them to do.

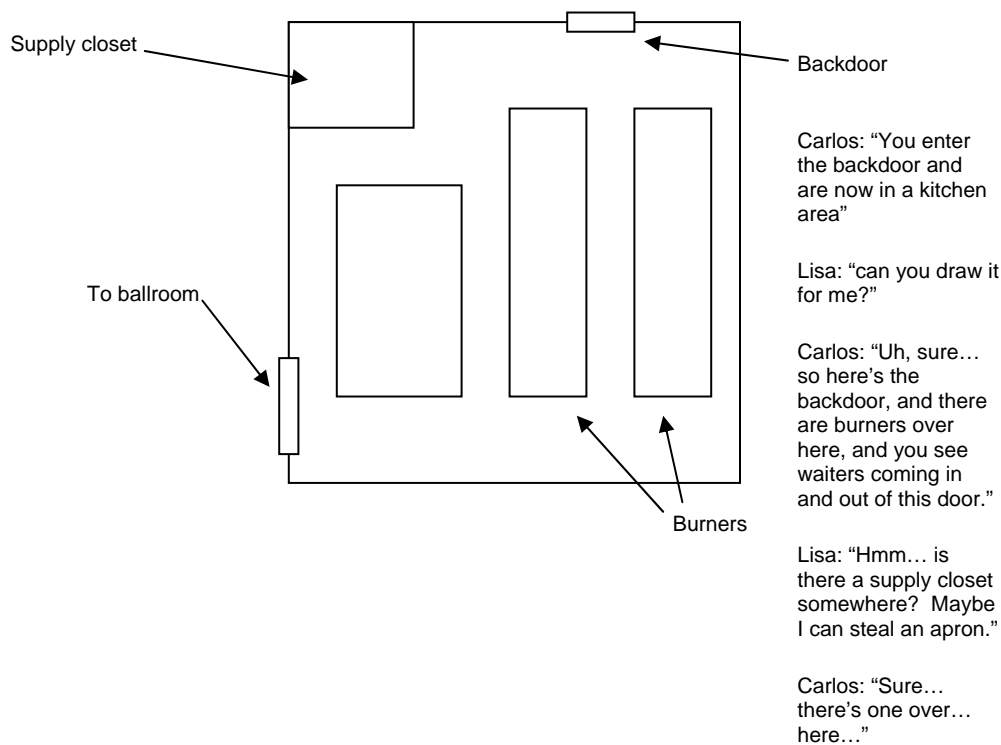
Post Mortem

Looking back at the experience, I would say that I was surprisingly pleased with the result of my adventure. I was really nervous about it up until the game ended, because I was afraid that I would screw up somewhere, or that I might have forgotten something (I actually did, at some point in the game). But in the end, it seemed to me that people had fun and that everyone plotted a fairly good interest curve.

What went right

Simple story structure: As I mentioned earlier, I was initially thinking of having a more complex story, with a lot of deception and secrecy. I think that if I had stuck to that plan, the players would have just been confused by the lack of simple goals.

Just wing it: The fact that I made a conscious decision to not prepare too much forced me to be more open to where the players wanted to take the story. For example, in the beginning of the game, Lisa kept exploring the alley between the building and the parking garage, so I just created a backdoor in that area that led to a kitchen, which I drew on the spot. This attitude of “Yes, and...” really helped make the experience less frustrating, and a lot more fun, both for the players and myself.



The storyteller as an active character: I gave myself the role of “the guy who sits in the van and types a lot.” That way, whenever I felt like I needed to give the team information that they weren’t getting, it didn’t feel like I was cheating. There was a point in the game when everyone kept asking about security cameras, and I hadn’t planned for any of them, and Lisa made the comment “man, this guy, like, trusts everyone!” This prompted me to tell them that they were being watched after all, but that if they gave me some time, I could replace the feeds from the security camera.

Customized characters: Giving people the ability to choose their own skill helped the players get into character more.

A challenge for everyone: I wanted to make sure that I took everyone’s abilities into account when I was creating the maps and scenarios in the building. I made sure that there were vents for Lisa to crawl in, but I also made sure that couldn’t get far without needing the team’s help. I made sure to give Jake opportunities to crack people’s skulls, and for Alyson to play dress up. Oh, and of course, I made sure to give Lisa a room filled with vehicles to pilot.

What went wrong

Write it down! While I didn’t forget to draw the maps on the index card, I did forget to write down certain details that would have been important to the game. At one point, I had forgotten to mention that there was a fire escape in the building until I realized that the team needed it. Luckily, I had a character who could perform a “building scan,” and inform the team that they had a “secret fire escape” behind them.

Dice makes things more exciting: An hour before I started my game, I realized that it really could have used some dice. And true enough, at certain points in the game, someone would ask something like, “can I shoot his arm?” and I would think to myself, “this is a really good opportunity to have a dice roll!”

In fact, I think in general, the game would have benefited if I had taken the time to create some sort of rpg-stat system for player creation. Looking back, I really should have given more thought to the “game” part of this adventure.

Better puzzles: Another low point in my game was the puzzle portion of it. I really didn’t give the puzzle much thought, as it was just a 3-part jigsaw puzzle. I addressed this by making sure that the puzzle came right after a high point in the game, so it would provide a less tense situation to attend to. In retrospect, I also wish I had integrated the puzzle more into the game. (See Appendix D for puzzle description).

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Be careful about splitting up your team keeping your team separated can provide for interesting situations, where they can work in parallel towards the same goal. However, it can also lead to situations where you forget to give attention to the other team. There were points in my game when I almost forgot about one group because I got carried away with the other.

This is clearly visible if you take a look at Jake's interest curve during the helicopter sequence. During this time, Lisa was busy hanging on to Jason's helicopter and trying to get it to crash. Jake had a big gun with him, but couldn't use it because of Lisa hanging on to the helicopter, so he had to wait until she was able to get it down before he could do anything.

What I learned

The power of imagination: one of the most important things I learned from this exercise, I actually learned outside of making the game. I learned it while I was explaining adventure games to my mom. Our conversation went something like this:

Carlos: "You just kind of sit around the table and tell stories to each other. Like, an example would be if I said, 'you're in a prison, and you see a guard asleep by the door, what do you do?'"

Mom: "I get the keys and open the door?"

Carlos: "Right, and then I'd say something like... 'you open the door, but suddenly the guard wakes up and points his gun at you'"

And at that point, my mom started to panic. I realized then how powerful spoken word and a person's imagination can be.

Appendix A – Character Sheets



CODE NAME: "Commander" Cody

HEIGHT: 6'6"

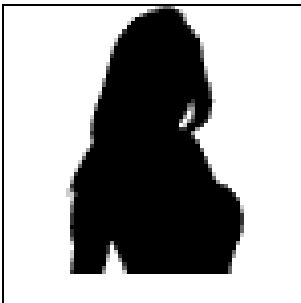
WEIGHT: 240 lbs.

SPECIALTY: Interrogation

Unarmed Combat

Agent Cody was kicked out of high school due to numerous incidents involving playground brawls. As a result, he took a job as a bouncer at a local club and as a janitor at Yale University, where he gained an interest in human psychology. He befriended numerous professors and eventually earned his PhD in Psychology.

During his stay at Yale, Cody ran an underground fight club, where he earned the nickname, "The Commander," for his almost supernatural strength. Since then, he has fought in mixed martial arts and kickboxing tournaments all around the world. That is, until he joined the Agency.



CODE NAME: Willow

HEIGHT: 5'4"

WEIGHT: 140 lbs.

SPECIALTY: Concealment

Forensics

Agent Willow worked as an exotic dancer to pay her way through CSI training. Upon graduation, she made her mark as a crime scene investigator in the Los Angeles police department. She became known for her ability to notice the tiniest details in seemingly plain and inconsequential areas.

Agent Willow is also a master of disguise, capable of deceiving even the most perceptive of investigators. She can fashion any disguise from almost nothing

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CODE NAME: Orange

HEIGHT: 4'10"

WEIGHT: 110 lbs.

SPECIALTY: Infiltration

Vehicle Operation

Agent Orange was born into a wealthy family controlling major corporations in the city of Chicago. She found her love for horses as she learned to horseback ride in her family's summer home. She was forced to leave home when her father was framed by his partners in a multimillion dollar money laundering scheme.

Agent Orange lived and trained with a group of Chinese acrobats for three years, until she decided to return to Chicago to complete her degree in Criminology. During this time, Agent Orange also rode in the Kentucky Derby.

Her lightning quick reflexes from her jockeying experience also makes Agent Orange the perfect Wheelwoman. Nobody knows why, but it seems that Agent Orange can drive or pilot almost any vehicle with superior mastery.

Appendix B – Briefing

1 week before the adventure

Email sent out:

Greetings, Recruits. Welcome to The Agency.

Before you receive your first assignment, you will need to fill out some paperwork. Please provide us with the following information by 2008-MAR-13 0800 GMT-0500.

Code Name:
Height:
Weight:
Specialty:
Previous Occupation:

Further information to follow.

Chessman

2 days before the adventure

Email sent out:

Greetings Alpha Squad.

I hope you are all enjoying your vacation, as we will be needing all of you to report for duty shortly. We have just received word of a code red threat. The Agency is still in the process of gathering information about the report, but we will have to ask you to cut all your vacations short and report to the Bandology operations facility at precisely 2008-MAR-16 1800H GMT-0400.

As usual, attached is the team details. More details to follow.
Chessman

(attachment: character sheet)

Right before the adventure



Jason Read is the President and CEO of Read Industries. He is known to sell weapons in the black market, while using his companies as a front. He has recently started a pharmaceuticals company that we suspect to be another front for his underground weapons development.

A few days ago, we received a report that Mr. Read will be selling a new biological weapon to the top terrorist organizations in the world. It will be done tonight, which is the same night as his launch party for his company's new drug.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to infiltrate Read Industries HQ, retrieve all samples of the weapon, and bring them to headquarters. Just get in, get it, and get out.

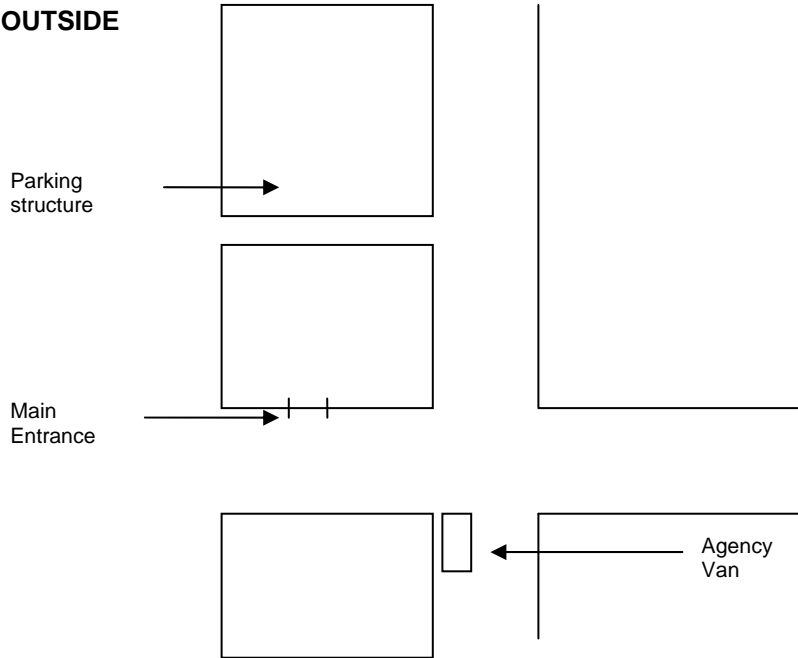


Satellite images show that the building is equipped with anti-aircraft guns, so we'll have to come in from the ground. There's a party going on, so you'll have to come in silent. Weapons are to be procured on site.

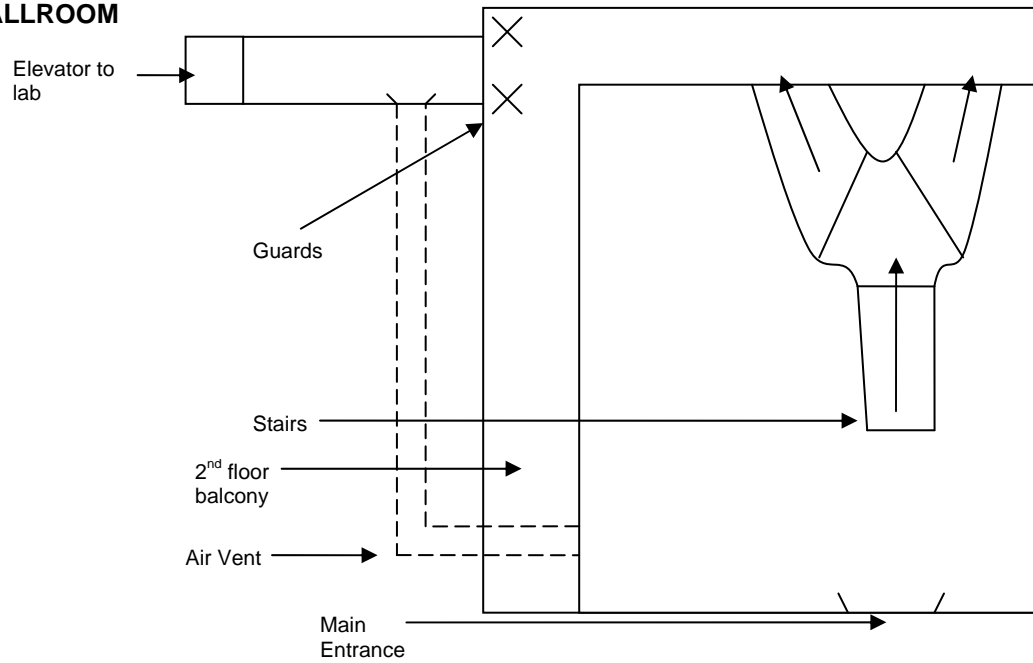
Good luck.

Appendix C – Maps

OUTSIDE

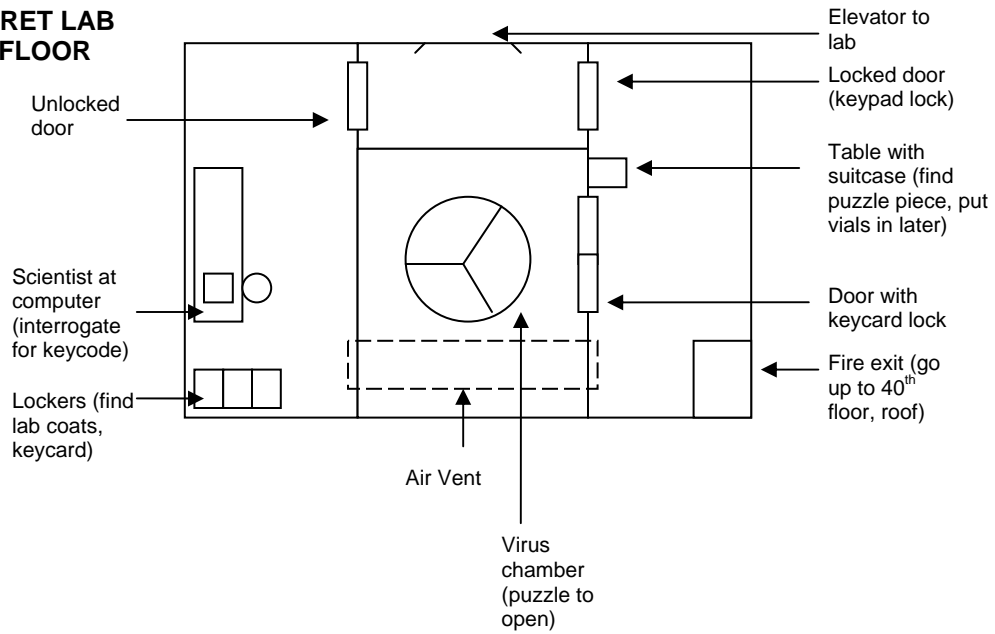


BALLROOM

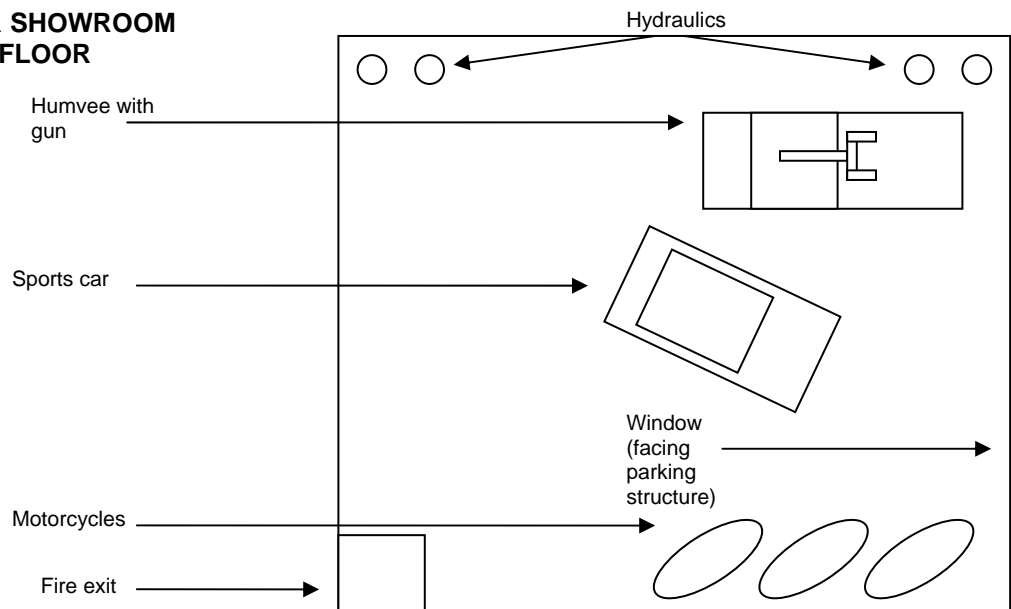


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**SECRET LAB
39th FLOOR**

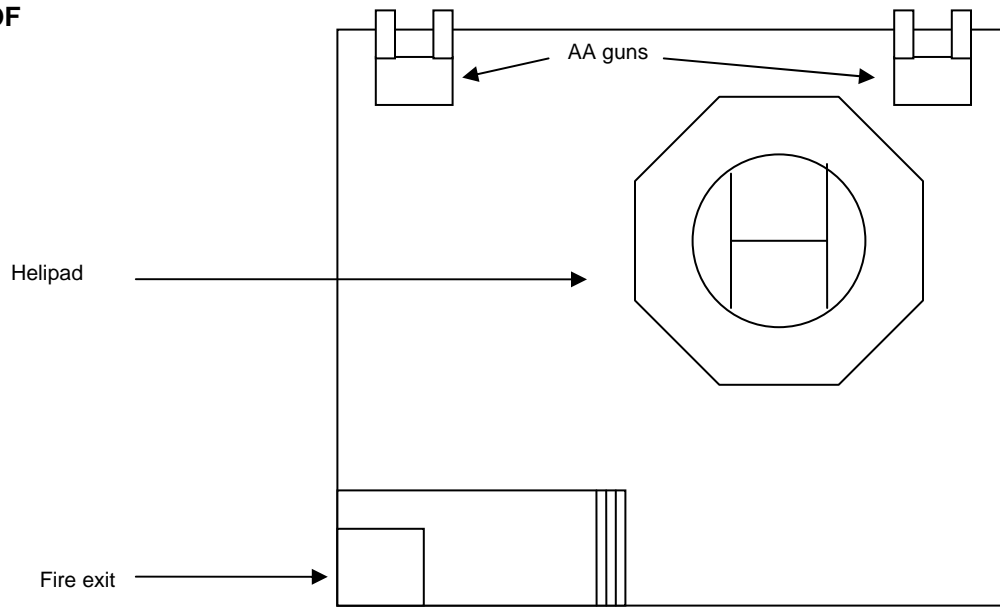


**CAR SHOWROOM
40th FLOOR**

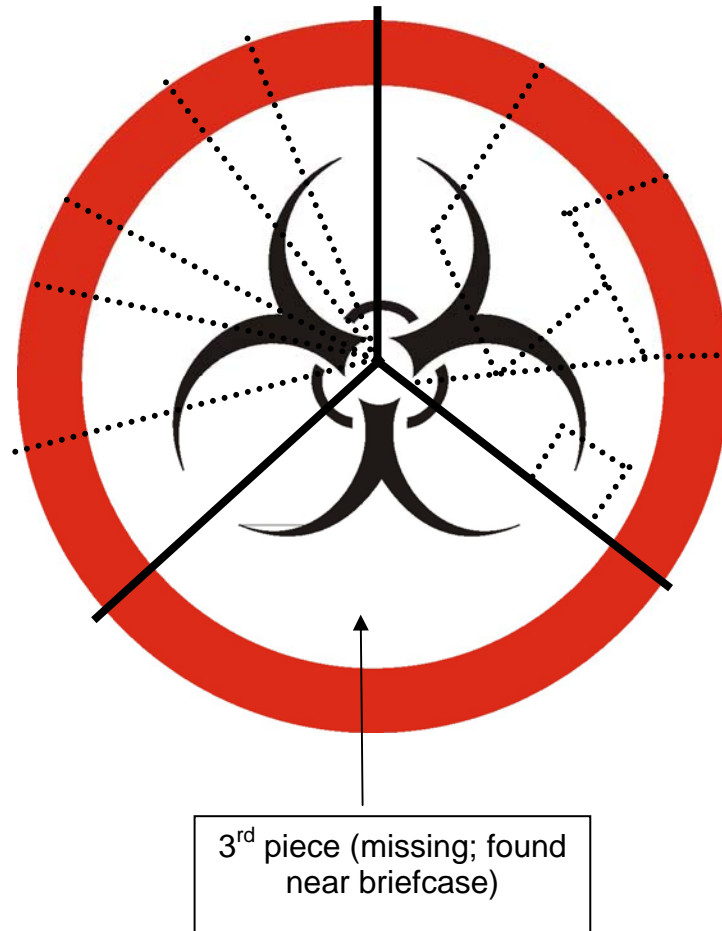


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ROOF



Appendix D – Puzzle

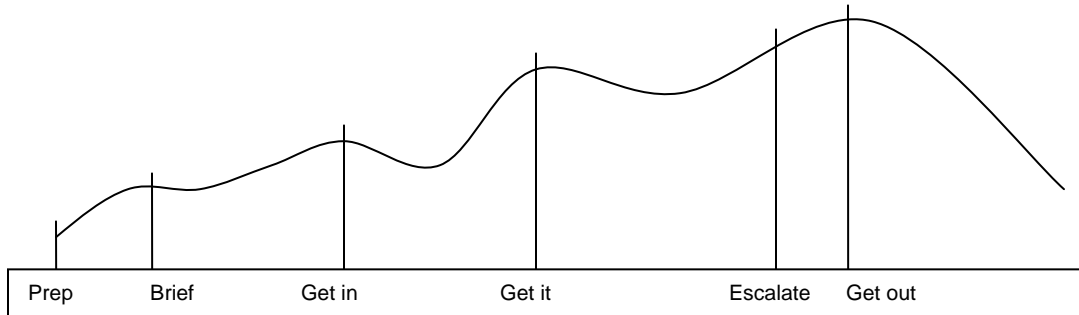


The puzzle in the game was a 3 piece jigsaw puzzle. Each player had to stand at a console in the virus chamber, and assemble the pieces to their puzzle. Once done, all three players had to connect their pieces together to form the biohazard symbol. This would unlock the virus vault. The third piece is not broken down, and is instead found in another part of the building. The last player would have to find this piece and bring it in to complete the puzzle.

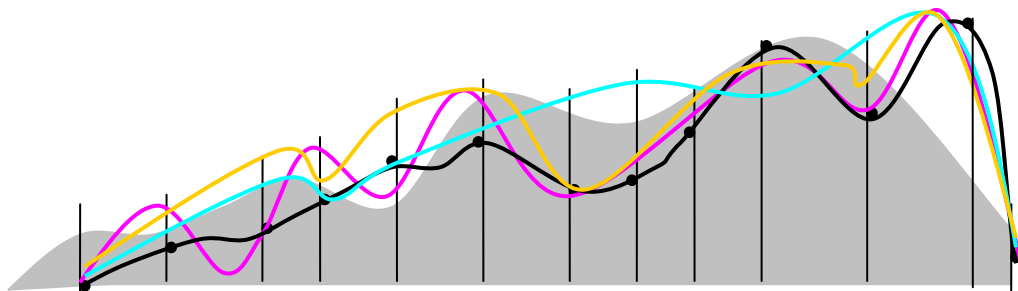
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Appendix E – Interest Curves

Before the game:



After the game:



- | | |
|------------------------|----------|
| 1. Briefing | Expected |
| 2. Entering | Actual |
| 3. Getting in the Lab | Lisa |
| 4. Elevator Footage | Alyson |
| 5. Scientist | Jake |
| 6. Locked room | |
| 7. Clean room / puzzle | |
| 8. Alarm / guards | |
| 9. Car showroom | |
| 10. Helicopter | |
| 11. Hostage | |
| 12. Showdown | |
| 13. End | |