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The Art of Enchantment

Examining the Role of Fantastic Narratives in Service
Experiences Through the Case of Escape Rooms

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The concept of an economy of experiences represents a social phenomenon which has been gaining momentum within both industry and academia in recent years, with experiences being hailed as the new predominant offering. Yet, while the ability of narratives to address people emotionally, enrich, and differentiate experience offers by creating so-called magic has been recognised, the potential of the narrative genre centrally concerned with magic and the discovery of new worlds seems thus far to have been neglected in the context of experience co-creation. In short, experience research has largely remained silent on the subject of one of the oldest and most deeply human media of experiencing in a research- and working culture dominated by logico-scientific thought. Through a largely exploratory approach, therefore, this thesis sets out to investigate the interdisciplinary potential provided by an application of literary theory and fantasy to the comprehension of the experience co-creation process. For this purpose, the phenomenon of escape gaming – a form of hedonic experience which often transports people into a story – will provide the basis for offering a reading and re-emplotment of hedonic co-creation processes as fantastic narratives, which have the potential to create uniquely human experiences. As such, this thesis contributes to experience research by generating an understanding of the co-creation process across different experience stages based on narrative thought, as well as to narrative research in the social sciences by viewing narratives as much more than a methodological tool, but rather as overarching concepts with the potential to frame an experience and thereby enchant the customer.

Keywords: Experience economy, experience co-creation, narrative, fantasy, fiction, storytelling, escape rooms

1. Introduction

*"It's not about giving the guests what you think they want. It's not that simple. Titillation, horror, elation, they're politics. The guests don't return for the obvious things we do, the garish things. They come back because of the subtleties, the details. They come back because they discover something they imagine no one noticed before. Something they fall in love with. They are not looking for a story that tells them who they **are**. […] They're here because they want a glimpse of who they **could** be."*   (Nolan and Joy, 2016: 00:54:40-00:56:12)

The introductory quote, taken from HBO's 2016 hit series *Westworld,* captures much of what current scholars have theorised about the experience economy (Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2013b; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Although this science fiction series deals first and foremost with themes such as artificial intelligence and human consciousness it can, in fact, also be seen as a rather incisive allegory of societal changes towards consuming hedonic experiences and satisfying desires which are already taking place today (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Boswijk, 2013 ; Boswijk, Thijssen, & Peelen, 2007; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Prebensen, Chen, & Uyzal, 2014a). According to some researchers, these changes include a shift towards a logic of feeling and emotion in our lives, which is reflected in people's desire to actively seek out immersive experiences instead of mere gratifying service encounters (Boswijk, 2013 ; Prebensen et al., 2014a).

Within this context of the experience economy, much research still employs what Bruner (1986) calls a paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode of knowing, focused on absolutes of true or false, real or not (see also Czarniawska, 2004). Such approaches seem ill-fitting for an individualistic concept like experiences. Meanwhile, the interdisciplinary use of narratives seems to be a field which has to reveal its full potential, especially when it comes to understanding phenomena connected to the formation of memorable experiences. Therefore, this thesis employs a narrative mode of thinking as a research contribution which may provide novel insights into this phenomenon, which seems strongly characterised by individual emotions and desires (Belk et al., 2003; Boswijk, 2013 ; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). This approach is beneficial, because it may reveal novel insights into framing processes as well as generate a narrative conceptualisation of service experiences. Although narratives have been used copiously within the study of management and organisations and are widely acknowledged as an excellent methodological means of uncovering and understanding peoples' experiences (see Allan, Fairtlough, & Heinzen, 2002; Corvellec, 1997; Corvellec, 2015a, 2015b; Czarniawska, 2004b; Gabriel, 2004), many studies do not seem to move beyond thematic mappings (Mura & Sharif, 2017). With regard to the experience economy, however, it can be said that narratives may be seen in two distinct contexts: a way for people to make

sense of their experiences, as well as a way for providers to frame, present, and distinguish their offer (see Pine & Gilmore, 1999), a notion which provided a starting point for informing the methodological approach taken herein. A narrative theory of services still remains unformed, necessitating this investigation to take an exploratory approach (Corvellec, 2015).

The focus this thesis employs when looking at narratives is the genre of fantasy. Its central aspects of addressing people on an emotional level by transporting the mind to different places and thus giving them a changed perspective or view made it especially relevant for this study (Bratman, 2016; Fabrizi, 2016; James & Mendlesohn, 2012; Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Tolkien, 1983). Even though many researchers speak of the ability of narratives to create so-called magic and add it to a service or experience offering as a distinguishing feature (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould, Price, & Tierney, 1998; Berg, 2003; Picard, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2014a), none have yet applied theories pertaining to the narrative genre centrally concerned with creating magic (both within the story and within the mind) to the context of experience co-creation. Research on experiences, in short, has largely remained mute on the subject of one of the oldest and most deeply human media of experiencing in a research- and working culture dominated by paradigmatic- instead of narrative thinking (Bruner, 1986; Corvellec, 1997; Czarniawska, 2004b). However, the use of fantastic concepts may provide a new understanding of how memorable, emotionally impactful hedonic experiences are co-created, potentially enabling a fresh view and conceptualisation of the experience from a narrative angle. Inspired by the introductory quote, this thesis raises the question whether creating magic and selling fantasies may not become formative for an experience economy striving to fulfil not only mere self-actualisation needs, but address deeply human desires by offering immersive stories that enchant people.

This process becomes visible through the case of escape rooms, a phenomenon of hedonic entertainment which has taken many Western and Asian markets by storm and seems to be thriving on the sale of customised, short-term experiences combining pleasure derived from discomfort (Berenson, 2015; Bisnow, 2017; Fink, 2017; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kolar, 2017; Liu, Mattila, & Bolton, 2018; Lodi, 2017; Nicholson, 2016). Here, in order to achieve immersion in a relatively short period of time, people are quite literally transported into a story, giving rise to the question of what exactly happens in this process, and how it influences and enables experience co-creation.

In guiding its reader through the conducted research, this thesis in itself represents its very own narrative, of which this chapter may be seen as the exposition. Having briefly outlined the context, framework, and case, the following chapters will investigate the interdisciplinary

potential provided by the application of literary theory and fantasy to the comprehension of phenomena involved in the process of experience co-creation through a largely exploratory approach grounded in hermeneutics and narrative knowledge[1]. Since no clear narrative theory of services is yet established, the theoretical framework used herein is conceptualised as a blend of literary- and social science theory, inspired by Bruner's narrative mode of thinking and with the goal of enabling the re-storying of an experience as a narrative. In doing so, the use of narratives in the experience economy inspired a methodology focused on elucidating both of the aforementioned framing and sense-making functions, prompting a research design that incorporates the model of narrative communication as well as the different phases of an experience. Framework and methodology, then, enable a reading and re-telling of the overall experience as a fantastic narrative, based on the findings from a triangulation of focus group- and semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. As such, this research positions itself as an exercise in narrative thinking in a research field still interspersed with paradigmatic approaches. By approaching the service experience from a narrative angle, it hopes to provide novel insights into both narrative- and experience co-creation research.

1.1 A Narrative Approach to Service Experiences

First, a short elaboration on context is needed, since all narratives are highly context-sensitive. (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Corvellec, 2015; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Kim, 2016). Overall, this thesis makes a contribution to previous research on the experience economy as defined by Pine and Gilmore (1999; 2013), who see experiences as a distinct form of output and describe every business whose main offer is an experience as part of this economy (see also Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). What, then, is an experience and – more importantly – why can escape rooms be seen as experience offers? Pine and Gilmore have defined experiences as "memorable events that engage each individual in an inherently personal way" (2013, p. 26). Accordingly, its true value is intangible and lies within the experience itself, which combines entertainment with learning and remains present long after the point of consumption because it lingers in people's memories (Jensen, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Schulze, 1992; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). A recent study by Liu et al. (2018) points out that hedonic experiences in particular are often more memorable, as they combine feelings of pleasure and pain. This gives people the chance to boost their sense of identity, forming hedonic experiences which modern customers seem to be "drawn to" (Liu et al., 2018, p. 2). These kinds of experience are said to provide people with a chance to escape everyday life by offering

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[1] The rejection of classically scientific methodologies for understanding social phenomena

challenges and the opportunity for achievements which "enhances their inner power, identity, and self-transformation"(Cohen & Taylor, 1976; Liu et al., 2018, p. 2).

The phenomenon of escape rooms can be seen as a service experience offering pleasurable pain, as it deliberately puts people into an uncomfortable (locked in) situation to create titillation and fun (Kolar, 2017; Lodi, 2017; Nicholson, 2016). Players have to solve puzzles in order to advance, meaning that the phenomenon also combines Schulze's (1992) experience characteristics of learning and entertainment. In fact, escape rooms have so far largely been studied because of their educational value (Boschi, 2016; Boysen-Osborn, Paradise, & Suchard, 2018; Humphrey, 2017; Kinio, 2017; Kolar, 2017; Nicholson, 2016). However, Kolar (2017) already showed that this phenomenon, when conceptualised as a playful experience, defies traditional experience frameworks, calling for a closer focus on emotional concepts. Concurrently, the entertainment side of an experience focused on pure escapism and amusement is often deemed the more important experience aspect (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Therefore, this thesis sets out to investigate the hedonic and emotional aspect. Moreover, escape gaming can be seen as an example of the growing customer autonomy which characterises the experience economy, allowing people to form their own individual narratives (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2014a; Snel, 2013). Supporting Pine and Gilmore's (2013) observation that the world has become more experiential, Forbes magazine stated that the industry has seen an "explosion of immersive live entertainment" (Fink, 2017), with escape rooms spearheading the trend and providing such disciplinary fields as gaming, theatre, and virtual reality with immense relevance for the experience economy. Additionally, most escape room operators decide to give their game a background story, a narrative setting which frames the tasks customers have to solve, and which is intended to heighten immersion and suspense (e.g. Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018; The Gatsby Maze, 2018b). Finally, since they are originally derived from the world of computer gaming, many escape games employ fantastical motifs such as questing, heroism, and the immersion in a new and different kind of context, which made them interesting for this thesis (Bisnow, 2017; Exit Mania, 2017; Kolar, 2017). Hence, escape rooms as a form of hedonic consumption may be identified as a case through which the interconnectedness of experience co-creation and the exploitation of fantastic narratives can be examined.

Overall, the use of specific narrative genres as an analytical tool to make sense of experiences is only just beginning to show its potential within the field of service studies. Many authors have applied the concept to organisations, marketing activities, or as managerial tools, showing that narrative enquiries can generate hitherto unexplored patterns of explanation for

service management issues (Corvellec, 1997, 2004; Corvellec, 2015; Gabriel, 2004). Nevertheless, a narrative theory of services still remains unformed, resulting in a vast array of instructions for conducting narrative research, which tends to result in imprecise methodologies and thematic mappings reminiscent of structuralist approaches to narration (see Mura & Sharif, 2017).While narration generally is a means of sense-making employed by humans, the stories we tell often depict some imagined or ideal situation rather than being an accurate account of reality, locating them closer to the genre of fiction (Corvellec, 2006). Many researchers conceptualising narratives for the social sciences have drawn attention to this, pointing out that narratives, when enacted, become influenced by human processes of explication and sense-making (e.g. Corvellec, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004). However, paralleling foci on Bruner's (1986) paradigmatic knowledge, research often still seems to take structuralist approaches focused on categorising and thereby black-boxing individual sense-making processes. The recognition and analysis of fictional narratives may be valuable for understanding subjective issues surrounding the co-creation of experiences such as spontaneous hedonic framing (see Liu et al., 2018). While identifying as a hermeneutic research effort, this thesis is nevertheless grounded in the notion that both structuralism and sense-making are needed to examine a dynamic phenomenon like service experiences, because sense-making processes do not happen in a vacuum (*Content, Audiences and Production*, 2001; Livingstone & Das, 2009). In all, this thesis hopes to take a more social perspective towards how service experiences actually play out over the course of a narrative frame.

Furthermore, narrative construction in an experience context is often influenced by both the interaction of consumers with the setting as well as other individuals, resulting in consumers gaining more and more power over the formation of their own narratives (Prebensen et al., 2014a).In accordance with this development, many researchers tend to agree that customers who are more active in the process seem to evaluate the experience they co-created more positively (Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus, & Van Niekerk, 2017; Jantzen, 2013; Prebensen et al., 2014a). Liu, Mattila, and Bolton (2018) point out that hedonic experiences with an element of pain and physical discomfort are often regarded more memorable, allowing people to collect "fascinating life stories" (p.2). However, due to the subjectivity of the co-creation processes, there might still be a lack of understanding about the consumer's role as a resource integrator, mediator, and moderator of experience value co-creation (Prebensen et al., 2014a). Therefore, the debate about why and how people engage in the co-creation of such hedonic experiences has remained rather limited, with Maslow's admittedly dated hierarchy of needs being one of the most widely proposed answers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen et al., 2014a;

Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Recent research points in a similar direction, claiming that the framing of hedonic experiences is generally not well understood and calling for further insights on the spontaneous framing of service offerings as well as potential ways of recovery, as it is hard for people to determine in advance whether they would like such experiences (Liu et al., 2018). Research still mainly addresses perspectives informed by paradigmatic modes of thought, which stands in contrast to definitions of experiences as individualistic concepts strongly defined by narration (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Chang, 2018; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Prebensen et al., 2014b; Sjödin & Kristensson, 2012). Although service experience researchers often seem to graze themes of escapism, heroism, or magic (Arnould et al., 1998; Cassinger, 2010; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2015; Laing & Frost, 2014; Picard, 2015), there have, as of yet, been no studies regarding experience staging and co-creation which have placed an exclusive focus on concepts connected to fantastic narratives.

All in all, experience research has thus far largely remained silent on narrative as one of the oldest experiential media, failing to exploit the entirety of its resources. Fictional stories in particular are known to characterise processes of sense-making and connect with people on an emotional level, an aspect that can be pivotal for the formation of memorable experiences (Corvellec, 2006; Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Since the application of fixed models based on structuralist and logico-scientific modes of thinking (Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004) has largely yielded rather insufficient results in this regard, an approach based on narrative thought can be proposed for revealing insights into subjective experience co-creation processes. While the "why" of engaging in experience formation is a question a single thesis cannot presume to answer, the question of how a hedonic experience is co-created represents an intriguing research issue in need of closer scrutiny. Given the high amount of subjectivity involved, identifying narrative elements and examining how different stories interact with each other may be seen as an intriguing angle from- and manner in which to tackle this research problem. Thus, placing itself within the discipline of service management, this thesis will be drawing on both general and genre-specific literary theory in its framework, approaching service experiences from a narrative angle and thus viewing successful experience co-creation as something akin to a form of art. Such an investigation could not only promote the relevance of interdisciplinarity in experience research, but may also provide practitioners with a sense of orientation regarding a seemingly serendipitous, opaque, and individual process. As a whole, the research interest in how hedonic experiences are co-created addresses three perceived issues: the context of experience co-creation being often researched with a focus on paradigmatic knowledge; the case of escape rooms being mainly researched as learning tools

instead of hedonic experiences; and lastly the use of narrative frameworks which neglect the interplay of structuralism and sense-making. A narrative approach may provide – if not a solution, then at least a new perspective which draws attention to these things.

1.2 Research Aim and Questions

This section introduces the way in which the identified issues may be addressed within their socio-cultural context through the exemplary case of escape rooms. Service studies are opening up further towards interdisciplinary research, with examinations of the service sector from a literary perspective having already shown such investigations to yield new and useful insights (Cassinger, 2010; Corvellec, 1997; Czarniawska, 1999; Gabriel, 2004). Much as in the field of literary studies however, the fantasy genre and its potential for the creation of deeply human experiences via its affective nature and emotional impact has been underestimated (see Klauk & Köppe, 2014). Based on the problematisation outlined in the previous section, the aim of this thesis is therefore to advance interdisciplinary research on the social phenomenon of the experience economy and to examine how the use of the specific narrative genre of fantasy and its elements can contribute to a better understanding of the processes of hedonic experience co-creation. To this end, this thesis wants to provide a narrative approach to the process of experience formation. Doing so simultaneously represents an attempt at conceptualising experiences as narratives, and, in the context of an experience economy, viewing the entire world of experience co-creation as a fantastic narrative which addresses people on a more deeply human level, thus providing an ideal catalyst for emotion and even liminality. The objective is to generate a theory- and evidence-based framework of experiences from a different angle, viewing experience co-creation through the lens of fantasy and thereby generating knowledge which may be useful in the conscious and active staging of hedonic, and potentially even transformative experiences. In the attempt to reach this aim, the following research questions will provide guidance throughout the study:

1. *How can narrative theory, particularly pertaining to the fantastic genre, be used for gaining a new understanding of the characteristics of experience co-creation?*
2. *Which fantastic narrative elements characterise the dialogue surrounding the expression and reproduction of hedonic experiences?*
3. *What is the special value of fantasy across the different stages of the experience co-creation process?*

Here, the first question in particular guides the investigation, while the following ones serve as sub-questions aiding the examination of the former. In order to begin answering these questions,

a literature review investigating experience co-creation will identify knowledge gaps and reveal the potential for further interdisciplinary approaches in the field. Subsequently, an introduction to the use of narratives accompanied by an overview of the specific literary and fantasy theory used in this thesis should provide further clarity with regard to the initial research question.

Moving on from literature to fieldwork, deeper insights will be provided by an exploratory examination of escape room experiences, spanning both providers and customers across different levels of narrative communication and experience stages. To do so, the experience itself will be seen as a holistic entity, the narrative of which reaches further than the moment of experiencing. Thus, this examination shall attempt to identify elements of what will be called an overall experience narrative, which elucidates a bigger picture than a focus on the mere individual stories played. To this end, a narrative analysis of company websites in combination with semi-structured interviews with professionals from the industry will be used to show how escape rooms, as products of an experience economy, draw on the characteristics of fantasy in formulating their strategic narratives. Correspondingly, observations of- and focus group interviews with participants could serve to reveal the special value drawn from enacting- and re-shaping fantastic experience narratives. Through the analysis and discussion of this data, a novel and potentially valuable facet of understanding may be added to the spectrum of experience co-creation research.

1.3 Delimitations

With regard to this project, certain delimitations needed to be drawn in terms of theory, fieldwork, and method. The selected theoretical background of fantastic literature stems from a strong overlap of previous social science research with genres such as mythology or romanticism, (Arnould et al., 1998; Cassinger, 2010; Picard, 2015), as well as from the fact that fantasy especially speaks to people on an affective level, guiding emotions and addressing desires – aspects of central importance in experience economy research (Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Although it is certainly necessary to include general literary theory on narratives, the genre-classification can help to infer the specific meaning, value, and expectations narratives evoke (Arnould et al., 1998; Cassinger, 2010; Gabriel, 2004). In this case, the topic of authenticity, which has been widely discussed with regard to the experience economy in general and tourism experiences in particular, will deliberately remain at best a peripheral point in this study. Since escape rooms provide an experience which is quite clearly staged, it may, for the purpose of this examination, be assumed that consumers of these

experiences possess a reflexive level of awareness of the offering's nature (Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Vendrell Ferran, 2014).

As experience businesses are often located in affluent societies (Boswijk et al., 2007; Nilsen & Dale, 2013; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013), the fieldwork will focus on the area of Skåne, Sweden, where escape rooms can be found in the cities of Lund, Helsingborg, and Malmö. Due to the interest expressed upon initial outreach and the subsequent establishment of contact, the escape rooms of *The Gatsby Maze* and *The Alley* in Malmö quickly emerged as the main fieldwork sites for this thesis. Additionally, these escape room providers were chosen since they offer story-based experiences in English, which enabled the observation and interviewing of a more culturally diverse set of participants. For reasons of consistency, the website analysis shall also focus on webpages of escape games around Skåne and the Öresund region, adding facilities in and around Copenhagen in order to attain a larger variety of contents. Finally, the applied methods were chosen in order to reflect both the production- and reception sides of experience narratives, hoping to capture some of the dynamic co-creation processes and synergies between the two since examining and hearing more than one proverbial side of a story is deemed important when conducting qualitative research (Collins, 2010). With these theoretical and practical delimitations in mind, the following chapter will map out existing research on the experience economy and experience co-creation as well as the previous use of narratives in this particular context, thereby further carving out the research gap at hand.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the overall thesis, this section will serve to further explicate the central issues already indicated by the problematisation. Doing so, it represents a critical reflection on previous research with regard to both disciplinary issues and the social phenomenon of experience co-creation. Experiencing is a human condition (Jantzen, 2013; Pine & Gilmore, 1999), yet it was only recently that the concept of an economy of experiences gained notable traction within academia (Boswijk, 2013 ; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). The relevance of the experience concept had already been pointed out by researchers like Alvin Toffler (1980) and Gerhard Schulze (1992) in the late 20th century, but it was not until the late 1990's that the actual term experience economy was coined by the works of Rolf Jensen (1999), and perhaps most notably researchers Pine and Gilmore (1999), who predicted that businesses which would "relegate themselves to the diminishing world of goods and services" would soon become irrelevant (p. 25).

The experience discourse initially strongly focused on- and intertwined with the concept of consumer value (see Holbrook, 1999; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), which emphasised the

importance of aspects such as play (e.g. Grayson, 1999) and spirituality (e.g. Brown, 1999) as elements which engage consumers on an emotional level. The discussion gained new traction with Vargo and Lusch's (2004) proposal of a service dominant logic, outlining the shift from a producer- to a consumer perspective and stressing the co-creation of value. Grounded in the work of researchers like Grönroos (2006), this view rapidly became paradigmatic in itself (see Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Hultman & Ek, 2011), causing research to re-focus on the proverbial next step predicted by Pine and Gilmore (1999) – experiences. This shift of foci went hand in hand with a rising popularity of experiential entertainment such as the escape room concept, resulting in a large part of the research on the experience economy and experience co-creation being as recent as the 2010's (see Argenton, 2015; Buonincontri et al., 2017; Kolar, 2017; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Thus, it may not be surprising that – although the concept itself was coined nearly twenty years ago – there is still a lack of clarity about what exactly constitutes the experience economy, which industries belong to it, and which offers can be labelled an experience (Lorentzen, 2013; Nilsen & Dale, 2013). In fact, some authors still argue that experiences show such strong overlaps with services that they should be treated as a subclass of the latter instead of being deemed an economic offering in their own right (Nilsen & Dale, 2013). Due to this similarity, the concept of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) has been inherited by experience research (e.g. Buonincontri et al., 2017; Kohler, Fueller, Matzler, & Stieger, 2011; Lugosi, 2014; Prebensen et al., 2014a). Since escape rooms create meaning and value intangibly in an interaction between producer and consumer, this notion forms one of the foundations for the study at hand.

Experience co-creation has become the topic of a great deal of current research, with experience thinking (see Pine & Gilmore, 2013) slowly being recognised as a way of distinguishing and customising value proposals, and experience economy studies evolving into an independent research field (Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). This field has been described as cross-disciplinary, opening up the possibility for hitherto neglected research angles and methodologies (Jantzen, 2013; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). With the leisure sector adopting the experience concept particularly enthusiastically, a large part of the research literature dealing with experience co-creation still seems to employ a formal economic- and managerial perspective, with even Pine and Gilmore (2013) admitting their focus to be primarily business-based. Meanwhile, this experience co-creation research, particularly within the leisure sector field of tourism, frequently mentions the importance of the co-creation of narratives (e.g Prebensen et al., 2014a), a concept that strongly overlaps with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) notion of staging and work as theatre, which is deemed a central aspect of the experience economy.

Researchers within the fields of organisational studies and art point out the potential of narratives to elicit individual experiences (Gabriel, 2004; Welikala, 2007; White & Hede, 2008). Nevertheless, specific applications of the narrative concept to experience co-creation and staging remain few and far between, which may be due to difficulties concerning definitions, clear delineations, and methodologies. With regard to this knowledge gap, the following theory review will therefore represent an attempt to elucidate if – and how – narratives are being addressed within the context of experience co-creation, thus taking up and substantiating the first research question. To find out how fantastic narrative elements can contribute to a better understanding of experience co-creation, concepts from both experience economy research and narratives in the social sciences need to be scrutinised.

2.1 Theory Review: Experiencing and Narration

With regard to the problematisation presented previously, a closer look will now be taken at research pertaining to the fields of the experience economy and experience co-creation, and the role of narratives within the social sciences respectively. By doing so, certain necessary definitions as well as common methodological approaches may be established. This endeavour in turn has the potential to reveal both the strengths and potential pitfalls of a narrative approach to experience co-creation, while simultaneously supporting its necessity. With regard to the chosen literature, a special focus has been placed on narratives and experience co-creation in tourism, since researchers of this field seem to have adopted the experience economy concept most enthusiastically, and since the topic itself, as a form of leisurely and hedonic consumption, can be deemed thematically close to the chosen example of escape rooms.

2.1.1   The Experience Economy

As mentioned earlier on, the experience economy concept has been coined nearly twenty years ago, with the first notions of it dating back even further (see Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Despite this, there still seems to be a considerable amount of ambiguity with regard to the terminologies surrounding it. Researchers still appear uncertain as to the sectoral delimitations of the experience economy and its fuzzy boundaries (Lorentzen, 2013; Nilsen & Dale, 2013). Pine and Gilmore (1999) have laid out five main implications of the experience economy which, along with other attempts to characterise the creation of experiential value (e.g. Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Prebensen et al., 2014b), are perhaps the most detailed description to date. While these implications represent guidelines as much as definitions, they can be summed up as follows: offers have to be mass customised, work becomes theatre, authenticity becomes the new consumer sensibility, experiences themselves can serve as marketing tools, and the

economic key lies in charging admission. Beyond such general markers, it seems that a description of the experience economy, which often does not go beyond statements like "industries [...] whose primary aim is to provide experiences" (Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013, p. 11) or an economy whose predominant offerings are experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2013), necessitates a definition of the notion of an experience itself.

Experiences seem to be an equally elusive concept newly (re-)discovered by both industry and academia as a means of distinguishing business offerings and putting forth more enticing value proposals which address higher emotional and self-actualisation needs (Boswijk, 2013). Early on, Schulze (1992) established the notions of Erfahrung, referring to the educational side of an experience, versus Erlebnis, referring to the purely escapist and entertaining quality of experiences. While the entertaining half has often been deemed the more relevant (Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013), Pine and Gilmore (1999) have also drawn an important distinction claiming that entertainment, though at the heart of experiences, is not all. Based on levels of guest participation and environmental relationships, they proposed entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism as four realms of experience (ibid.). Like any model however, these realms of Pine and Gilmore's are not clear-cut, and experiences like escape rooms blur the boundaries and are hard to place definitively (Kolar, 2017). Pine and Gilmore have defined experiences as "memorable events that engage each individual in an inherently personal way" (2013, p. 26). Accordingly, their true value is intangible and lies within the experience itself, remaining long after the point of consumption (ibid.). A good experience is also characterised by the psychological concept of flow, a state of immersion which sets the experience apart from reality and can be evoked by a structure designed to provide an optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A recent study by Liu et al. (2018) points out that hedonic experiences in particular are often more memorable, as they combine feelings of pleasure and pain, giving people the chance to boost their sense of identity. While many other definitions have been put forward, most researchers seem to agree on the importance of experiences being a mental phenomenon, subjective and individual, connected to emotional responses, and preserved in memories (see Boswijk et al., 2007; Jantzen, 2013; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Some have concentrated on the role of certain stimuli in triggering experiences (e.g. Jantzen, 2013), while others focus on memorability and how out-of-the-ordinary an event should be in order to become an experience (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2014b). Yet, the basic notions outlined above should suffice for the purposes of this examination.

Due to its close relation to services, Vargo and Lusch's (2004) concept of co-creation has also been applied to experiences since all sorts of interactions – be they with providers,

environments, or other people – are said to lie at the core of experiences (Prebensen et al., 2014a). This co-creation process has been examined from many different angles, with the classically managerial (Holbrook, 1999), the sociological (e.g. Cohen, 1979), and the psychological (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Jantzen, 2013) being the most common ones, focusing on motivations, behavioural elements, or the role of certain stimuli. From these fields, various theoretical models have emerged but, perhaps due to the rather recently increased research interest, the overall discourse still remains quite limited, with many studies reverting back to Pine and Gilmore's basic frameworks (see Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Manthiou, Lee, Tang, & Chiang, 2014; Shim, Oh, & Jeong, 2017). One distinct aspect shared by many enquiries is the identification of different temporal phases, typically three: pre-, during-, and post experience phases are said to determine and moderate expectations, emotions, and eventually memories (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Prebensen et al., 2014b). Thus, the relevance of these phases centrally informed the approach of this study.

Escape rooms themselves have been scarcely researched as experiences so far. Only Kolar (2017) has pointed out their playful value, although an exclusive focus was placed on digital communication, neglecting the temporal phases. This review, therefore, needs to grasp a little wider into related fields. Due to the hedonic and leisure-oriented nature of many experiences (see Liu et al., 2018), it is perhaps not surprising that the experience economy concept acquired great vogue in tourism research (e.g. Bui, Wilkins, & Lee, 2014; Cohen, 1979; Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2014a). Recognising and stressing the hedonic side of tourism experiences as well as the shift of control and power from the organisation towards the consumer, many enquiries regarding touristic experience co-creation make use of Pine and Gilmore's (1999; 2013) concepts and attempt to formulate experience antecedents and consequences, or stimuli according to previously established models (e.g. Buonincontri et al., 2017). Many researchers have also dedicated attention to experiences as marketing tools, examining their role in destination image formation or their importance for knowledge creation and innovation (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Sjödin & Kristensson, 2012; Sorensen & Jensen, 2015). Surprisingly, however, research regarding central experience themes often relies on typically quantitative methods in order to make its point (e.g. Chang, 2018; Manthiou et al., 2014). More qualitative research approaches focusing on the individual can rather be found in disciplines concerned with art or media gamification (e.g. Kohler et al., 2011; Nobre & Ferreira, 2017). Indeed, consumers have been shown to seek out gamified experiences which fulfil needs for fun, competition, and social interaction (Kolar, 2017; Nobre & Ferreira, 2017). Such experiences are also identified as valuable sources of knowledge for providers, often

representing exceptional opportunities for companies to work together with customers in the co-creation process (Kohler et al., 2011). Such findings again underline the general amount of attention experience thinking has drawn to the growing autonomy and voice of individuals (Snel, 2013). With regard to this development, the concept of narratives has already been noted in tourism research, with researchers speaking of travellers constructing and co-constructing their own narratives said to lie at the heart of the final experience (Prebensen et al., 2014a).

Although such connections have been established, it remains to be said that overall, research on the experience economy and experience co-creation – especially with regard to hedonic service experiences – is still very much in the process of expanding into different research traditions, with the main themes and methodologies often still reflecting classically economic notions rather than focusing on individuals. This may be seen as somewhat paradoxical, given that all definitions of experience in this context seem to agree on the subjectivity and individuality of experiences, as well as the growing influence of consumers in the co-creation process. Within the field of experience economy research, a clear potential and need for further research from different angles may thus be identified. Concurrently, the following section of this review shall outline the role that narratives have thus far played in social science and service research, revealing a similar potential within this field.

2.1.2   The Role of Narratives

Since narration - making use of narratives to produce- and communicate interpretations of the surrounding world - is often deemed part of human nature (Corvellec, 2015; Czarniawska, 2004), it is perhaps not surprising that narratives have found their way into social science research, although hesitantly. Ever since the narrative turn in the 1980's (Czarniawska, 2004), narratives have established themselves as valuable tools in social science research. During the decade forerunners such as Elliott Mishler (1986) and Donald E. Polkinghorne (1988) already pointed out the relevance of narratives in qualitative interviewing, recognising their potential for eliciting individual experiences and essentially establishing the crucial foundations for narrative research. It was not until the 1990's that the social sciences' interest in narratives truly developed an impetus. Authors like Riessman (1993) are seen as strong drivers for establishing narratives as a crucially important tool with regard to qualitative research.

Up until the present day, the narrative approach has spread out into a variety of disciplines within sociology, while storytelling as a mode of discourse is said to prevail within all societal sectors (Salmon, 2010), even leading some researchers of the early 21st century to proclaiming the "dawn of a […] narrative age" (Salmon, 2010, p. 4). Narrative research has, for example,

become quite prominent within the field of health sciences, where enquiries into patients' own personal narratives have given insights into their individual experiences with diseases that are often chronic (e.g. Nordyke et al., 2010; Scrooby, 1994). Another field where narrative research has become a prominent factor is the sociology of education and pedagogy, where experiences of both students and teachers could be elucidated by this approach (e.g. Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017; Teng, 2017). With regard to service management, storytelling has provided a particularly fruitful perspective vis-á-vis organisations and organisational life, showing that even professional sectors that value objective information first and foremost can profit from this angle (Allan, Fairtlough, & Heinzen, 2002; Corvellec, 1997; Gabriel, 2004). Storytelling has, over the past twenty years, become a legitimate means of studying organisations and management scenarios, emerging as a successful managerial tool and means of solving miscommunication and misunderstandings in an organisational context (Allan et al., 2002). Often, narratives are also employed in researching organisational cultures and identities, even going so far as examining self-styled narratives of company sustainability which serve as a cover for keeping business as usual (Milne, Kearins, & Walton, 2006). It is also in this organisational context that the study and identification of specific kinds and genres of narratives has gained considerable momentum, with researchers such as Corvellec (2006) and Gabriel (2004) having put forth classifications of the different types of narratives that can become relevant in organisational environments.

When it comes to leisure experiences, it once again makes sense to take a look at tourism research as a thematically related branch within the experience economy, which has perhaps the closest resemblance to the kind of experience examined in this thesis. In this research stream, narratives have also found their entry as effective methodological tools (e.g. Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Towards the new millennium, researchers of touristic experiences noted a change within the industry, even labelling it a pre-paradigmatic phase of transition (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Today, storytelling is often considered in terms of cultural narratives which are constructed and perpetuated as touristic products or destination narratives employed in order to create a certain place image for marketing purposes, which is then reinforced through social media images (Avraham & Daugherty, 2012; Lund & Jóhannesson, 2016; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Even gender narratives of travel have found their place in research literature (Laing & Frost, 2017). Moreover, the narrative approach is frequently used to understand temporality in a tourism experience context, reinforcing the relevance of pre-, during-, and post-trip phases (see Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Still, some researchers decry a general lack of knowledge with regard to understanding the consumer's role in hedonic consumption (Ma &

Lew, 2012) and while narrative analysis has gained considerable recognition within the social sciences, it has, overall, been relatively neglected by tourism research (Kolar, 2017; Mura & Sharif, 2017). This seems somewhat counterintuitive, considering that the experience economy and experience co-creation are such prevalent topics within this research field. A recent review of narrative tourism research reveals a haphazard selection of methodologies in narrative tourism studies, which seem reluctant to select specific approaches, perhaps due to the fragmented state of narrative theory. Narratives are often not examined holistically, with many researchers offering a thematic- rather than an actual narrative analysis, which cannot adequately reflect the richness and depth of the material that can be gained (Mura & Sharif, 2017).

This paradox can be exemplified by two particular texts from the field of tourism research: both Picard (2015) and Arnould et al. (1998) deal with the impact of certain kinds of narratives when it comes to creating intense and memorable experiences but place their points of focus on other aspects than the narratives itself. Both touch upon the motif of the hero and the hero's journey – narrative elements which are often associated with tourism and traveling (Laing & Frost, 2014). In fact, hero's stories and epic narratives can also be found within organisational contexts, where they are often connected to biographies of charismatic individuals or studies of leadership (Gabriel, 2004). Strikingly however, within the leisure context, this specific kind of narrative is often exclusively applied to nature- and adventure experiences, during which customers are physically supplanted into a radically different environment of austerity for an extended period of time (see Arnould & Price, 1993; Laing & Frost, 2014). These types of experience are also the ones most commonly associated with liminality and self-actualisation (Goodnow & Bordoloi, 2017). Further enquiry into current experience economy phenomena such as escape rooms, however, may reveal the possibility of creating magic and experiential depth in new ways, with the help of fantastic narratives. Consequently, while narratives have established themselves firmly within the social sciences, attempts to apply them to the co-creation of hedonic leisure experiences remain limited and unfocused, concentrating more often than not on the experience provider while neglecting the full complexity of narrative formation.

2.2 Towards an Interdisciplinary Approach

Overall, the literature presented in the previous theory review seems to point towards a twofold knowledge gap, which opens up the possibility for further, perhaps more unconventional research widening the interdisciplinary spectrum for topics connected to the experience economy in general and hedonic experiences in particular.

Firstly, investigations focusing on the experience economy still seem to be in the process of unfolding their full potential and, although experience economy studies have been conceptualised as inherently interdisciplinary, research still mainly addresses perspectives informed by logico-scientific modes of thought (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Chang, 2018; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Prebensen et al., 2014b; Sjödin & Kristensson, 2012). Meanwhile, the framing process remains under-examined, with hedonic experiences being perceived as holding "unique challenges" for the field of practice (Liu et al., 2018, p. 12). With psychology forming perhaps the strongest field of influence, many models have been devised to capture the co-creation of hedonic consumer values and experiences (e.g. Jantzen, 2013), leading to a body of experience research which is still strongly informed by quantitative methods and positivistic ontologies. Concurrently, experience economy research often seems to focus more on the provider- than the consumer side of the co-creation process (Holbrook, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Both of these trends stand in stark contrast to definitions put forth by leading theorists. Departing from Vargo and Lusch's (2004) notion of co-creation, which overlaps considerably with experience formation, all of them stress the individuality and subjectivity of experiences as well as the rapidly progressing shift of autonomy and control from producer to consumer (Boswijk et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Snel, 2013). Given this discrepancy, it seems clear that the relatively young research field concerned with experience co-creation exhibits a need for further explorations which pay homage to the consumer's crucial role and study the co-creation process in a holistic fashion.

At the same time, narratives have gained a firm position as research tools within the social sciences, with researchers recognising their potential to draw out personal experiences (Czarniawska, 2004; Elliott, 2005). In fact, an "interest in people's lived experiences" and a "desire to empower research participants" have been identified as some of the most common themes running through narrative research in the social sciences (Elliott, 2005, p. 6). As of 2015, experienced narrative researchers such as Corvellec have pointed out that a narrative theory of services remains yet to be developed. This gap becomes clearer when taking a look at research employing narratives within the experience-providing field of tourism. Such enquiries, whilst often providing valuable qualitative insights, frequently brush the surface of narrative analyses and regularly remain mere thematic mappings (Mura & Sharif, 2017). Moreover, there seems to be a vast variety of opinions and instructions for conducting narrative research, which apparently tends to result in an imprecise specification of methodologies (ibid.). It is not entirely unexpected that analyses of certain genre-specific narrative elements are more often found in application to organisational contexts than with regard to individualistic hedonic experiences

(e.g. Corvellec, 1997; Gabriel, 2000; Gabriel, 2004). Where such investigations are undertaken, the narrative genre identified generally seems to be of a romantic- or epic nature, applied to rather extreme physical experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 1998; Picard, 2015). Even in such cases the narrative and its nuances often merely form the context or backdrop of more classically familiar subjects like service performance or the role of the servicescape (Arnould et al., 1998).

In the end, there are a number of problematic areas left in both experience economy studies and narrative social science research, which may be further elucidated by approaches combining these seemingly complementary fields. This suggestion also leads to a re-focusing on the first research question: the background and theory review at hand strongly imply that narratives can be used in understanding experience co-creation relating to their ability to disclose personal and subjective views in a field for which concepts like self-actualisation and emotions are of crucial importance. They have the potential to empower research participants, which again might be critical when examining experience co-creation, where consumers are gaining creative power. Moreover, when it comes to genre-specific enquiries, romanticist and epic narratives already seem to enjoy a prominent role. Both of these genres provide distinct overlaps with the fantastic, suggesting the potential suitability of this particular kind of narrative for research focusing on hedonic experiences. While the genre aspect is further discussed and justified within subsequent sections of this thesis, the review at hand can already provide a tentative answer regarding the usefulness of narratives for understanding experience co-creation, simultaneously emphasising the need for further research in precisely this context.

3. Theory

Within this thesis, the following chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the study, providing the major points of argumentation that may aid in answering the research questions. Stories, storytelling, and indulging in fantastic worlds are an age-old phenomenon, dating back all the way to the beginnings of human life and civilisation (Klauk & Köppe, 2014). In fact, some believe that the ability to tell stories and make sense of the world by doing so is precisely what distinguishes us as humans (Allan et al., 2002; Corvellec, 2015; Czarniawska, 2004). Stories have the ability to transgress time and space, challenge conventions, and bewitch the mind (Gabriel, 2004; Salmon, 2010). We enjoy them and seek them out for the worlds they reveal, the entertainment and instruction they offer, the experience of certain point of view, or simply for their sheer artistic quality (Meyer, 2011).

Unfortunately, these rich manifestations of social life were long thought of as marginal by-products unable to convey knowledge according to a positivistic, paradigmatic point of view (Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988; Salmon, 2010; Welikala, 2007). Along with the progressing need for meaning, self-actualisation, and identity within society (see Boswijk et al., 2007; Gabriel, 2004; Kolar, 2017; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013) and the psychological developments emphasising the relevance of stories for the construction of identity (see Gabriel, 2004), the narrative mode of knowing has had a profound impact within academia, receiving an increased amount of attention by being able to provide what logico-scientific thinking could not: inhabiting both social and artistic spaces, stories and narratives are what helps people make sense of the events they experience, and constitute a vital part of the construction of meaning (Cassinger, 2010; Gabriel, 2004; Welikala, 2007). According to Czarniawska (2004), meaningful human action can frequently become significant beyond its direct context, and thus may be seen as sharing the fundamental characteristics of text. Consequently, it is possible to extend the theory of literary interpretation to the realm of the social sciences (ibid.).

This chapter moves from context towards the concrete way in which the outlined issues will be disputed, introducing the analytical framework and the metaphorical lens though which the data will be viewed. Once again, it needs to be stressed that a narrative theory of services has yet to be developed, leading to a plethora of varying advice on how to conduct narrative research within a social science context (Corvellec, 2006, 2015; Kim, 2016; Mura & Sharif, 2017). This chapter will therefore not be dominated by a single universal model of narratives, but instead marries core concepts from the field of literature and social science which can be considered relevant for the study at hand. The subsequent sections shall be dealing with important characteristics and functions of fantastic narratives, attempting to highlight the most pertinent theories about a genre which has ever proved difficult to define (James & Mendlesohn, 2012). In the end, a reconnection with the realm of experience research will be achieved by tying the notion of liminal experiences in with literary theory and especially fantasy in order to further clarify and evidence how sense-making, meaning-creation, and processes of self-actualisation can be understood from this angle.

3.1 A Narrative Approach

Since narrative analysis will form the basis for interpreting the data gathered here, a closer look in these following sections should be taken at its practice and challenges, and how they informed the final approach taken in this thesis. Narrative theory may be seen as a discipline

engaged in a wider and wider amount of territories, moving from its initial place in literary studies towards the analysis of both other types of media and new disciplinary fields. Since our modern world enables storytelling in new ways besides writing and oral communication, this development has led some authors to talk of the "vortex of narrative theory" (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2005, p. 2), which draws in all manner of topics and disciplines. This is not seen as a negative development, since a narrative approach has been shown to enrich and re-skill rather than de-skill research in different sciences (*Interdisciplinarity*, 2004). In fact, Barthes and Duisit have compared the richness and variety of narrative to "life itself" (1975, p. 237), thereby echoing notions about its relevance also expressed by Barbara Czarniawska (2004), and stressing the necessity of further expanding the metaphorical vortex. Such developments do of course bear some important implications for the conceptualisation of narrative theory, necessitating it to become broader and more inclusive. Since stories can take so many shapes and appear in all manner of different contexts, it may at first seem like a daunting task to attempt any general assertions about them. However, there are always a few fundamental elements which require the attention of those who would analyse them. Humans are constantly in the process of constructing narratives, situating themselves within stories, and inevitably featuring as characters in each other's stories, which is why the manner of storytelling should be just as closely considered as its matter (Brooks, 1984; Meyer, 2011). While it is certainly possible to simply confine a narrative analysis to the plane of content, the importance of how a story is told and perceived should by no means be neglected, since it constitutes a large part of the overall meaning (Meyer, 2011).

Generally, narrative can be seen as a rhetorical act, a deliberate communication from one or more person(s) to another, which automatically raises the question of 'who is talking to whom' (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2012). In real life, the answer to this question may be quite straightforward, as the teller of the story is usually identical with its narrator, while listener and addressee also tend to be one and the same person. As soon as elements of mediation are introduced, however, this communication becomes more complex and layered, so that in a written narrative, the author is often communicating to the reader through multiple levels of meaning, reaching from what is said within a fictional story to what is actually being communicated (Meyer, 2011). Therefore, a model of narrative communication as presented in figure 1 can be helpful in distinguishing between the different roles and levels of meaning involved in the telling, reception, and eventual interpretation of a story (Meyer, 2011). Since the study at hand represents a case of multi-layered communication, this model was used for mapping out the fieldwork approach (see 4.1). Beyond modes and levels of communication, it

is especially important to have a grasp on central terminological distinctions, as well as the different ways in which narratives may be interpreted. Given the aforementioned plurality of the vortex of narrative theory, this can be deemed as even more relevant when applying literary theory to fields other than literary studies. The following two sub-sections will therefore address the traditions of structuralism, interpretivism, and sense-making, as well as the discrepancies between the notions of plot, story, and discourse. Later on, this information will help the reader grasp how the theory was operationalised for coding and analysis.
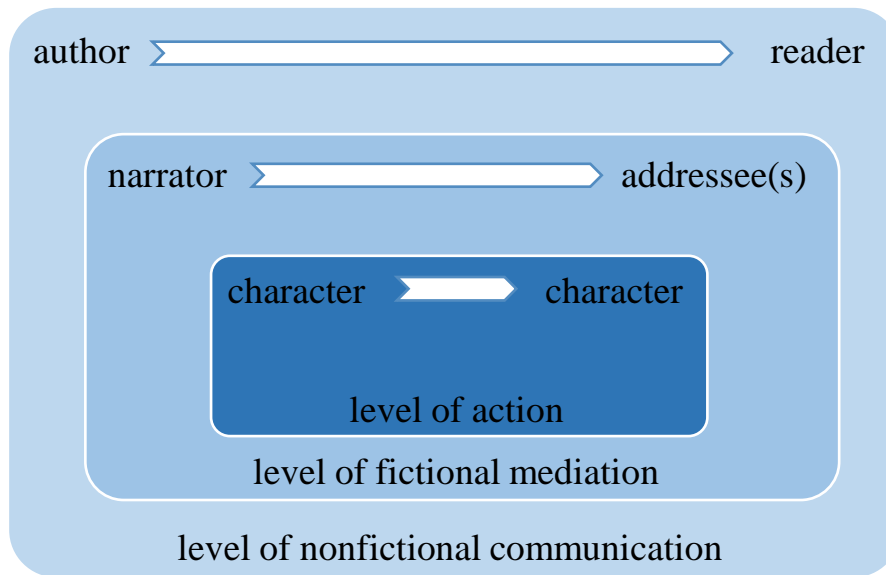
Figure 1:
Model of Narrative Communication. Simplified from Meyer 2011, p. 68 (see also Jahn, 2017).

3.1.1   Structuralism and Sense-making

In order to extract meaning from narratives, it is important to consider the different ways in which stories can be understood as, depending on the perspective, narrative meaning can be interpreted in a number of different ways (Cassinger, 2010; Meyer, 2011). The perspectives discussed here were chosen because they enable the researcher to blend concepts from a strictly literary toolbox with approaches relevant for the social sciences, where narrative most often goes beyond written text (Czarniawska, 2004). To research the case at hand and examine the narrative at different levels of communication, approaches of precisely this blended nature are needed.

Generally, literary theories are concerned with the author, reader, code, or context of a text (Meyer, 2011). Structuralist or narratologist viewpoints on the construction of narrative meaning are concerned with language and code (Fludernik, 2005). With the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, literary studies are said to have experienced a linguistic turn, since researchers representative of this perspective found themselves faced with an insurmountable variety of

narratives (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Meyer, 2011). Structuralism seeks to establish certain classifying principles based on the distinguishing of genres and the extraction of meaning, with the assumption being that "(…) no one can produce a narrative without referring himself to an implicit system of rules and units" (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 238). Narratological analysis is thus concerned with uncovering codifications, patterns, and deep structures within a text, from which meaning is said to derive (Cassinger, 2010). The production of meaning is therefore thought of as an inherent quality of the narrative itself (ibid.). Researchers conducting structuralist analyses work upon the assumption of some kind of general, logical structure or model, moving from it into the particular narrative at hand (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). The approach rests upon the assumption that narrative can be described and thereby known, and that texts are therefore stable entities to which readers will react in ways that are largely predictable (Fludernik, 2005). Consequently, this descriptive focus constituted one of the major points of criticism upon the cultural turn in literary theory, which challenged the view of language as a neutral medium which may reveal universal truths and values (Meyer, 2011). Critics have pointed out that a purely narratological analysis alone is not generally able to provide a new reading of a text as for example adopting a certain cultural viewpoint could (Fludernik, 2005). Others have also questioned the assumption of a text's stability, claiming that the reader, by interacting with a narrative, influences the analysis of it (Eco, 1979, 1981, 1989). Narratologists such as Chatman (1978) and more recently Wolf (2012) have also helped the field to expand beyond classical notions of narrative, extending the concept to different media and social spheres, and shifting the creation of aesthetic illusion into the focus of attention. From these deliberations it becomes clear that for this research, a more flexible and inductive approach to narratives is needed as in dynamic social situations, the creation of narrative meaning may also happen accidentally and unintentionally.

An understanding of narrative meaning in terms of sense-making stresses the co-creative power of the recipient, paralleling reader- and context oriented literary traditions. Both Gabriel (2000) and Czarniawska (2004) view stories as tools for humans to make sense of their experiences. By acting in a certain way based on previous experiences, and then re-telling one's experience to others, meaning is generated, transforming an event into an experience by storying or, in Czarniawska's terms, emplotting it (see also Cassinger, 2010). Thus, the notion of sense-making focuses less on the interpretation of textual prompts, but rather assumes that people interfere with the world in the process of creating individual meaning. This concept can be seen as closely related to context-oriented literary theories which stress the fact that a text's meaning depends on the time, place, general situation, and the perspective from which it is

being both written and read (Meyer, 2011). Cassinger's (2010) notion of sense-making also seems related to Czarniawska's (2004) way of viewing the reader as an increasingly active agent in a continuum of explication, explanation, and exploration, graduating from the passive role of recipient to being a co-author and, finally, being the author of their own story. Taking up a distinction between story and discourse, Czarniawska's way of reading thus describes a process which moves from observation to understanding and finally enactment, where readers themselves turn into authors (Corvellec, 2006). All of these steps may be seen as crucial in the process of sense-making, and form a complementary addition to the structuralist views presented earlier on.

All in all, it can be said that narratology quite certainly presents an appropriate basis and starting point for approaching an analysis of the narratives examined in this thesis. Recognising overarching patterns and elements can be deemed especially important as the point of interest is represented by a specific genre, and therefore certain classifications will have to be made in order to establish some form of order among an overwhelmingly varied and rich set of data (see Barthes & Duisit, 1975). However, it is equally important to move beyond pure analysis and classical narratology, where the recipient largely remains passive. Since escape rooms place customers within a story, it would only be reasonable to employ the notion of sense-making as standing in a close relationship to structuralism, thus combining descriptive analysis with hermeneutics and creating a more rounded understanding of this dynamic situation.

In order to undertake this, a return to Bruner's (1986) previously mentioned modes of thought is necessary, as they have informed some important strategies for narrative analysis. Polkinghorne distinguishes between two kinds of narrative inquiry based on these modes (Kim, 2016). Firstly, an analysis of narratives based on paradigmatic thought arranges findings around themes which can be discovered across different stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). As such, it seems to share the characteristics of structuralist analysis. Narrative analysis, as the second option based on the narrative mode of thinking, represents a method of emplotting one's data, making a variety of seemingly disconnected elements coherent and bringing to light narrative meanings which are not themselves explicit in the data (Czarniawska, 2004; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). This narrative mode of analysis has seemingly already inspired various experimentations with literary genre, analysing actions and events in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome of analysis. Since the discussed notions of structuralism and sense-making seem to be most comprehensively reflected in Polkinghorne's (1995) approach, its use seems the best attempt at uniting the data yielded by the different methods into a cohesive whole. This thesis shall therefore attempt to identify

certain themes in order to emplot the data at hand as a fantastic narrative, thereby treating narrative analysis as more than the mere transcription of data (Kim, 2016). With these basic elements and concepts established, it now becomes necessary to delve into a clarification of core narrative concepts for which many different definitions, uses, and understandings exist.

3.1.2 Discourse, Plot, and Story

As the introductory section shows, narratives can be considered in quite a broad sense, with Barthes and Duisit stating that in an "[…] infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies" (1975, p. 237). Barthes generally seems to employ a rather wide-ranging definition of what can be regarded as narrative, which on the one hand opens up the potential of the interdisciplinary use of the concept, but on the other hand makes it necessary to clearly outline what exactly constitutes a narrative (see Czarniawska, 2004). Michael Meyer defines the concept thus: "Narrative texts present ways of seeing the world in the stories they tell. Stories are about characters in a sequence of actions and happenings in particular circumstances" (2011, p. 65). The concept of the story, therefore, is seen as closely interwoven with that of narrative and the two are, in fact, often casually used as synonyms. Indeed, the definition of narrative favoured by Jane Elliott (2005) does exactly that, equating narratives with stories and focusing more on the way in which chronological ordering can give meaning to events, thereby turning them into a narrative. Elliott is just one example of many authors using narrative in a social science context, for all of whom the nature of – and relationship between - the concepts of narrative, story, discourse, and plot seems to differ slightly.

For Yiannis Gabriel (2004), who uses narratives in an organisational context, the existence of plot is the key distinguishing feature between a narrative and a story. In addition, he also deems the way in which a narrative is delivered important. Thus, in order to be considered a story, a narrative should also aim to be entertaining and produce an effect on its audience (Gabriel, 2004). Gabriel's notions are turned somewhat on their head by the definitions proposed by Barbara Czarniawska (2004). As mentioned earlier on, her main interest lies in examining meaningful actions, which is why she sees plot as a causal chain of actions, which end up constituting a meaningful sequence. Here, story seems to be the wider term, with Czarniawska (2004) stating that in order to become a story, a narrative needs to have a plot. While plot is, yet again, the central distinguishing feature, Czarniawska coins the term "emplotment" (2004, p. 20) to denote how a narrative is given a plot. Much earlier, however, narratologist Seymour Chatman (1978) presented a considerably more fundamental distinction

between the content of a narrative on the one hand, and the manner in which it is told on the other hand (see also Fludernik, 2005).

Out of this plethora of definitions, Chatman's notions are the epitome of the way literary scholars differentiate between what happens and how it is told. According to Michael Meyer (2011), a narrative is the combination of both discourse – i.e. *how* something is told – and story – i.e. the content of *what* is being told. Within a story, then, the plot is what creates a connection between single events, making sense of them in relation to one another in a frame of temporality and causality, moving from a beginning- to an end point (Corvellec, 2006, 2015; Meyer, 2011). However, there remains some debate as to how elaborate a plot needs to be in order to constitute a story. Genette (1994), for example, contended that a story may be found even within a single action or event, as long as some form of transformation or transition from one state to another (for example from life to death) could be identified. In the context of this study, keeping in line with Czarniawska's focus on meaningful action, it certainly makes sense to adopt this point of view. With regard to discourse, or the 'how' of narration, the most important features of interest are the functions of the narrator, including their being within or outside of the story (homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic), their trustworthiness and reliability, and the treatment of time (Meyer, 2011). When analysing the story, aspects like characters, settings, atmosphere, beginnings and endings and, importantly, possible worlds become relevant (ibid.).

Since this thesis is concerned with what happens when people are being put into a story for the sake of their own entertainment, aiming to create memorable experiences, it makes sense to consider both discourse and story in the case of escape room narratives. It is important that discourse, here, will be used as a theoretical term in the literary sense, not to be confused with Foucault's wider notion of societal discourse which is so frequently employed by the social sciences (Rheinberger, 2010). However, considering that the narrative analyses performed for this thesis deal with the social phenomenon of the experience economy, the literary definitions of story, discourse, and plot should be enriched by social science notions such as emplotment and the relevance of meaningful action, as is done in Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis. This is especially the case because hedonic service experiences like the ones provided by escape rooms break open the classical literary and theatrical notions of the passive reader or audience by making narration a co-creative process in which the story is completed and filled with meaning by the customer, stressing once more the interplay of structure and sense-making. An attempt at examining service experiences equally necessitates a short discussion of the role and relevance of genre, which will be presented in the following.

3.1.3   The Relevance of Genre

Genres and their identification are often responsible for certain expectations people have of a story which makes them relevant for the study at hand. When studying genre, it is important to keep in mind that the aim is by no means to study every single work and deduce universal laws (Meyer, 2011; Todorov, 1973). In the words of Tzvetan Todorov, it is thus "(…) not the quantity of observations, but the logical coherence […] that finally matters" when analysing and interpreting genre (1973, p. 4). Genres exist at different levels of generality and often, as with the fantastic genre chosen for this study, epic, tragic, and comedic variations can be found within texts of the same genre (Todorov, 1973). This notion reflects the fact that in the end, works within a certain family still remain individual pieces of art with their own unique messages and characteristics (Todorov, 1973; Tolkien, 1983). Hence, when researching works within a genre what one is looking for is not a perfect fit, but rather an overarching, logical pattern whose motifs have some form of consistency by virtue of which certain works may be grouped together. This sentiment is also reflected by Barbara Czarniawska's conception of genre which she sees as "(…) a system of action that became institutionalised and is recognizable by repetition" (1999, p. 10). According to her, meaning is derived from systems of symbols which are familiar and recognisable, constituting culture as well as literature (ibid.). While every work is characterised by intertextuality (Eco, 1990), it simultaneously represents an evolutionary change to pre-existing systems. Therefore, Todorov (1973) cautions, it is necessary to move between the particular work in question and its genre in an examination. In fact, many social scientists employing narrative theory have done exactly that, identifying not only the presence of a narrative, but also classifying it in order to infer its meaning and value, as well as the expectations it may elicit (Arnould et al., 1998; Cassinger, 2010; Gabriel, 2004). Genre, therefore, can be deemed a crucial factor for the formation of expectations about a story, as well as the interpretation of the meaning and message of the overall narrative. The analysis and emplotment of the data presented in this thesis will thus attempt the balancing act proposed by Todorov, moving from particular case to overall genre and attempting to reflect on the way genre affects processes of sense-making.

3.2 Fantastic Narratives

Today, fictional media play rather a large role in people's lives, often from early childhood on (Klauk & Köppe, 2014). Fiction, which is said to be deeply intertwined with anthropology, is therefore often valued for its lessons of morality, its function of mediating knowledge about the world, and its role in the development of cognitive abilities, while reception processes of

fictional works are often characterised by feelings and emotions, as the result of a creation of fictional truths both about the fictional world and the recipient themselves (Bareis, 2014; Klauk & Köppe, 2014). Walton's theory of make-believe perhaps represents one of the most prominent theories about fiction and fictional worlds, using a very broad definition based on Aristoteles' concept of mimesis, which includes all forms of representation (Klauk & Köppe, 2014). In order to participate in an imagined world, people accept certain principles which in turn generate certain consequences bound by certain rules. If, for example, one sand pie is accepted as real, it follows that all other sand pies are to be accepted in the same way. By treating objects in this way, people give them meaning in a game of make-believe (Bareis, 2014). Fiction, therefore, can be seen as any instance in which objects are treated this way, making Walton's theory an ideal starting point for reasoning that escape rooms present instances of fictional narration. This theory also ascribes great importance to the recipient, holding that only active participation in a game of make-believe makes it possible to fill the fictional world. To a certain degree, this explains why people become invested and immersed in fictional worlds, prompting emotional reactions to things known not to be real in an effect described as the paradox of fiction (Bareis, 2014; Vendrell Ferran, 2014). The fictional genre of fantasy has moved one step further than make-believe, claiming complete, unjaded immersion or what Tolkien (1983) calls enchantment as its achievement of art.

Fantasy is a tricky genre to define and often overlaps with other literary genres (Cornwell, 2018). However, its stories have gained immense momentum and commercial success in the 21st century so that today, they can be identified as occupying an important place in Western cultures (Fabrizi, 2016). For this reason, academic attention has more and more focused on the popular genre, and fantastic works are nowadays often given the same critical analytic treatment as canonical literature (ibid.). Traditionally, the fantasy genre is often seen as originating from medieval romance, fairy tales, and ancient myths and legends (Kramer, 2017). Yet the manifestations of fantasy stories are often unique and varied (James & Mendlesohn, 2012).Theorists generally agree, however, that fantasy deals with the impossible, the supernatural. It may thus be seen as a cluster of works which share a number of common tropes (James & Mendlesohn, 2012; Todorov, 1973). These tropes can be objects or characters, but they may even be narrative strategies, as evidenced by Ulrike Schnaas (2004). From this very fuzzy and hard to pin down genre, however, deeply human insights may be gained. Fantasy can be seen as a form of fiction which expresses human yearning and should be seen as worth studying, since the things people yearn for and love can be seen as central to their very identity (Kramer, 2017). George R.R. Martin also touches upon this aspect in his definition of fantasy,

stating that "(…) there is something old and true […] that speaks to something deep within us" (2018) or, to put it in the simpler terms of Fabrizi (2016), it asks the big questions of life, addressing issues of morality, heroism, the role of the individual, and even the nature of one's own character. Therefore, there is tremendous merit in engaging critically with fantastic narratives, especially with regard to their influence on current social phenomena such as the experience economy. For many people, the fantastic can provide a sense of meaning and orientation as to our being in the world (Kramer, 2017), which is perhaps one of the reasons why more and more people choose to spend their money on immersing themselves in narratives offered by service operators (read: escape rooms). The character of these narratives, and the degree to which they employ fantastic motifs and tropes may determine the memorability of service experiences as well as their overall success.

For the investigation undertaken in this thesis, a few of those tropes, strategies, and motifs were selected in hopes of providing the basics for understanding fantastic elements and their effects and functions. Firstly, relating back to fantasy's roots in ancient mythology, the hero's journey or monomyth will be considered, since this quest can be deemed one of the most popular tropes of fantastic narrative (Hammond, 2018). Secondly, a closer look will be taken at what is often considered a landmark theoretical text in the fantasy genre (Honegger, 2010). "On Fairy Stories" (1983) lays out the fundamental properties of fantasy, naming recovery, escape, and consolation as its chief tasks or achievements. Thirdly, the concept of worldbuilding and subcreation, which stretches further than just the realm of literature, will form the final main theme for this investigation. The following sections shall therefore introduce concepts which will guide the investigation. By no means meant to be universal or exhaustive, they are often deemed central to the fantasy genre. Any of these themes may provide a useful analytical lens for investigating service experiences, revealing how meaning is created, desires addressed, and experiences made.

3.2.1 Epic Stories and the Monomyth

Fantasy, which often employs themes of questing, draws many inspirations from ancient myths and epics (Penn, 2013; Tolkien & Flieger, 2010). Among the strongest connections is the trope of the hero's quest or hero's journey (Campbell, 2004; Hammond, 2018). The notion of the hero's journey as an underlying structure of many human narratives was coined by Joseph Campbell in the mid-20th century. In his work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* he demonstrates that many of humanity's hero-figures share some common traits and undergo a similarly structured journey over the course of their story, which is said to be roughly parallel

to rites of passage found in ancient civilisations (Philllips, 1975). As such, the monomyth is characterised by three fundamental phases: separation, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2004).

The first phase sees the hero, often presented as the chosen one, as being called to the threshold of adventure. (S)he may reluctantly enter this stage or venture forth on their quest voluntarily like many heroes of Greek myth (Campbell, 2004). Typically, the hero meets some kind of presence guarding the threshold beyond which (s)he must pass to start the adventure (Philllips, 1975). As a rite of passage, this stage means a cut from the "attitudes, attachments, and life patterns of the stage being left behind" (Campbell, 2004, p. 37). Having passed the threshold, the hero discovers themselves in a new and unfamiliar world which can still be strangely familiar and intimate. Here, (s)he undergoes a number of tests and trials, for the completion of which (s)he may receive supernatural aid from a mentor- or companion figure. At the end of the period of trials, the hero has to master one final "supreme ordeal", a last test after which (s)he gains a reward (Campbell, 2004, p. 227). The reward is an ultimate boon, which may be represented by an object, but which often also means a spiritual "expansion of consciousness" (Campbell, 2004, p. 228) giving the hero new insights and providing mental illumination. The final stage is that of the return, which yet again takes the hero back to the threshold, at which (s)he must leave behind the supernatural aid. Emerging, the hero returns with the boon (s)he has gained which can restore their own world in turn. In the end, the hero is therefore master of two worlds (Philllips, 1975). This monomyth, according to Campbell (2004), is deeply rooted within the human subconscious, appearing again and again in mankind's most popular stories in a plethora of variations. The monomyth is certainly not an exclusive trait of fantasy. It is, however, quite pervasively found in fantastical stories, which frequently incorporate notions of the supernatural and the one chosen hero. Accordingly, the monomyth has become ubiquitous in fantasy, especially quest fantasy (see Senior, 2012), a concept reflected in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien whose main characters can be identified as undergoing hero's journeys (Croft, 2012). Tolkien's writings, of course, are not the only ones to display these motifs. German author Michael Ende (Die Unendliche Geschichte, 1979), J.K. Rowling (Boll, 2011), and even George R.R. Martin (Cornwell, 2018; Kesner, 2014; Martin, 2011) employ such elements. In any case, the monomyth in fantastic literature is quite well documented, and this thesis would lack the time and space to move beyond the few representative examples presented here.

Liu et al. (2018) call for further research on hedonic framing and Kolar's (2017) study on escape rooms describes playful flow as based on an activity structured for optimal experience. As one of mankind's oldest stories, the monomyth might turn out to be just that structure. Using

the monomyth in academic literature examining process is actually not uncommon, with Cassinger (2010) quite directly employing the concept and Picard (2015) merely alluding to it. From these examples, it becomes clear that a social science perspective seems to value the importance of the structure and ritualistic qualities of the monomyth from an anthropological standpoint, arguing that the frame of the monomyth can give people orientation and helps them navigate and grasp the rules of a new environment, while simultaneously being able to infuse such an environment with a sense of mysticism and magic (see esp. Picard, 2015). Service experiences, therefore, can often be seen as miniature hero's journeys (see also Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2015; Laing & Frost, 2014). The boon at the end, however, often stays a rather literal physical object (Belk et al., 2003). For this study, the rough structure of the monomyth could be superimposed over the three experience stages which may further an understanding of the role of people's yearnings and desires, revealing boons which are quite immaterial, perhaps even transformative, and the value of which lingers on for a long time. Additionally, conscious staging of the fantastic monomyth may help experience providers guide customers through their work by means of a subconsciously familiar structure, so that an extraordinary, magical experience may be more easily co-created.

3.2.2   Recovery, Escape, Consolation

Having thus far refrained from introducing J.R.R. Tolkien's notions, it is now time to turn to his essay "On Fairy Stories" (1983), which has been a defining point for theoretical discussions of fantasy literature and is said to belong to a criticism on imaginative writing dating all the way back to Homer and Aristotle (Honegger, 2010; Kramer, 2017). The theoretical foundations and criteria presented and outlined by him have become an "(…) inspiration and model for most contemporary fantasy literature" (Honegger, 2010, p. 119). Some researchers have even used the term of a Tolkienian fairy story to describe fantasy adhering to Tolkien's criteria (Northrup, 2004). Tolkien (1983) addresses questions about the nature and origin of fairy stories, as well as their use and value. His thoughts on use and value in particular contain four concepts which have since become defining markers of the genre: fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. The former concept, will, due to its close linkage with the concept of sub-creation, be addressed in the following section.

In order to explain the meaning of fairy stories, it is paramount to first grasp the concept of Faerie. One of the most important concepts used by Tolkien, Faerie is "the realm or state in which fairies have their being" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 113). Deemed indescribable by words, the closest Tolkien gets to a definition is by labelling it as imagination which has the ability to

achieve beauty (Milburn, 2010). Fairy Stories, accordingly, are stories about the realm of Faerie, not stories about fairies. The realm of Faerie, while invisible, may be entered by men when they are in an enchanted state. Interestingly, this state is described as making people forget about the passage of time, transporting them outside of their own time or even "outside Time itself" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 129). Faerie is intimately linked with human desires. Indeed, the primal desire at the heart of faerie is "the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (1983, p. 116). Distinguishing between the common concept of the willing suspension of disbelief and the enchantment of secondary belief, Tolkien (1983) stresses that fairy stories are "(…) a natural human taste" (1983, p. 136), potentially valuable to every human being.

In terms of the value of fairy stories, recovery is concerned with the notion that people may become weary of the world, unable to find any wonder in it anymore (Hazekamp, 2008). Recovery through fairy stories can help people become like children again (which is not to say childish!), enabling them to perceive things in a new way. In Tolkien's words, it means "(…) a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view" (1983, p. 146). It is important to note that fantasy worlds may still contain familiar everyday aspects which, by virtue of the fantastic context, may be perceived in a new light (see Hazekamp, 2008). Escape and Consolation are two further and closely related values of fairy stories. First off, Tolkien (1983) takes issue with the common understanding of escapism as something to be scorned, pitied, or in the worst case, equated with madness. This is far from the case, with fiction representing not "(…) a turn away from life, but an active experience within life" (Phelan, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, escape should be encouraged as it presents people with an opportunity to briefly forget the worries of life (see Hazekamp, 2008; Tolkien, 1983). The greatest form of escape, however, is that from death (see Hazekamp, 2008). This final escape is closely connected to the main consolation provided by fairy stories, which is the happy ending. Venturing the claim that all fairy stories must contain this element –a sentiment challenged with gusto by later authors of fantasy (see Cornwell, 2018; Martin, 2018) – Tolkien (1983) contrasts it with the tragedy, where a catastrophic ending generates pleasure through catharsis, and coins the opposite term of the eucatastrophe. This "sudden joyous turn" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 153) generates pleasure by doing the exact opposite of the catastrophe, which is denying the tragic ending. A catastrophe is not impossible: on the contrary, the more real and likely the potential of failure, the greater the joy generated by a eucatastrophe: "when it happens, it can give the […] man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 154). Ultimately, the joy

in Fantasy is explained as stemming from enabling a quick glimpse of underlying reality or truth.

Fantasy, in the Tolkienian sense, allows people to fulfil deep and impossible desires by helping them escape their ordinary world for a while. At the same time, however, it enables them to regain a fresh view of familiar everyday things and concepts, leading to a sudden and surprising joyous turn which grants them a momentary glimpse of truth, and ultimately returns them from the realm of Faerie with a renewed perspective and outlook. While service experiences perhaps rarely achieve anything as intense as "Joy beyond the walls of the world" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 153), it may nevertheless be instructive to see if hedonic experience offers like those found in escape rooms could utilise these concepts in order to create truly immersive story-worlds from which customers may indeed return with a sense of recovery and consolation. This notion of immersive worlds leads further to Tolkien's (1983) fourth value of the fairy story, further developed by Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) and positively ubiquitous in modern pop-culture: worldbuilding.

3.2.3   Worldbuilding and Subcreation

Subcreation is used in describing the fourth central value of fairy stories: fantasy. The idea of fantasy, which has come to designate the entire genre of modern fairy stories, is the form of art connected to the creation of such stories. It is different from mental image-making or imagination, but rather involves an "inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 138). The art which binds imagination to the final result is sub-creation, a central cornerstone of fairy stories. The precise meaning of sub-creation is perhaps best described by Tolkien's (1983) views on the suspension of disbelief. Willing suspension of disbelief, in the context of fairy stories, is deemed an erroneous description:

"What really happens is that the storymaker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside (…)" (1983, p. 132)

Therefore, what fairy stories should aim to achieve is the enchantment of secondary belief, during which the laws of the secondary world are accepted as true. Social science scholars recognise the potential of stories to do this, associating them directly with terms like magic and enchantment and conceding that this can be achieved in a service context (Allan et al., 2002; Arnould & Price, 1993; Picard, 2015). As Allan, Fairtlough and Heinzen note: "when stories are used confidently and consistently, cynicism dies away" (2002, p. 4) – even in naturally

cynical contexts. Achieving the art that is fantasy and creating a secondary reality consistent in itself is a difficult task. People can imagine and express a world where the sun is green, but to render this world credible is "(…) a rare achievement of Art, indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 140). The skill that can generate secondary belief is enchantment. Fantasy aspires to create enchantment, designing a secondary world which may be entered by both designer and spectator as "partners in making and delight" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 143) with the aim of shared enrichment. Indeed, one of the main appeals of fantastic works can be found in the rich and detailed realness of their worlds, which often necessitate several volumes of additional material (Bratman, 2016; Day, 2015; García, Antonsson, & Martin, 2015; Pesch, 2003; Rowling & Pottermore Limited, 2018).

This spreading of fantastic worlds across different platforms and media was recognised by scholars like Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) or Henry Jenkins (2007) who outline how subcreation can expand over multiple media. Each segment tells a fragmented story set in the overall world about which a single, definitive source of information does not really exist. This practice, which has stretched into nearly all subgenres of fantasy and science fiction (see Jones, 2017), gives people the feeling of catching only glimpses of a logically cohesive world that is separate from their own (Jenkins, 2007; Wolf, 2012). Psychological research even suggests that constructing imaginary worlds is something highly instructive and ingrained in human nature. Imagined worlds can be found across most human cultures, and the ability to simulate scenarios is said to be innate for people. In fact, mankind possesses designated cognitive systems allowing people to participate in fictional worlds while being able to decouple them from real life (Wolf, 2012). The main challenge, of course, is despite the transmedial, transnarrative nature of such worlds and universes, to remain consistent (ibid.). In a well-designed universe, the subcreated world can serve as a believable backdrop for all sorts of different narratives, allowing the audience to co-create and explore the secondary world on their own (Jenkins, 2007; Wolf, 2012). If the logic of the secondary world is cohesive enough to inspire secondary belief, other people will be able to inhabit and enrich it with their own stories, making them transauthorial as well. In other words, a good secondary world can support multiple stories. The study of such worlds may therefore adopt a wider view of narrative and narrative elements, rather than focusing on single plots, which directly informed the rationale of this research (Ekman & Taylor, 2016; Fast & Örnebring, 2017).

Based on these insights, worldbuilding can be seen as a highly co-creative process. A secondary world may be inhabited by both designer and spectator, transforming them into partners and co-creators. Accordingly, worldbuilding may be deemed essential in an economy

where the individual becomes more and more autonomous and demands a voice in the creative process (Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Snel, 2013). Therefore, experience narratives striving to provide elements of co-creation and customisation might benefit from adopting the rationale of worldbuilding.

3.3 Stories as Liminal Experiences

Having outlined some central characteristics and functions of fantastic narratives, a brief note should be made of their connection to the concept of liminality, which ties back to Pine and Gilmore`s (2013) prediction of a transformation economy, and which has become a prominent topic in service experience literature (see Bui et al., 2014; Laing & Frost, 2017). The concept of liminality denotes a boundary or threshold and in a wider sense "a place of transition from one state to another or a between state that leads to change" (Elliott, 2011, p. 96). This change is often interwoven with a re-forming of personal identity and may be triggered by encountering new sets of circumstances (Beech, 2011; Elliott, 2011). Anthropologists like van Gennep have emphasised the connections between liminal experiences and rites of passage (1984).

Campbell (2004), too, explores the transformative power of rites of passage in relation to the monomyth, where the hero returns from his quest as a changed person, echoing van Gennep in pointing out a common theme across different cultures and time periods. However, while for anthropologists like van Gennep (1984), the transformation ends with the incorporation of the individual into a new world after having passed the threshold, this step is only the beginning in fantastic fiction (see Campbell, 2004). Thinking back to the initial definitions, stories in fact innately involve a transformation from one state to another (Cassinger, 2010; Meyer, 2011). The ambiguity and in-betweenness associated with liminality (see e.g. Beech, 2011) could also be seen as related to what Todorov (1973) describes as the state of uncertainty when encountering the fantastic (see also Schnaas, 2004). Indeed, liminality has been described as "(…) a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen" (Turner, 1979, p. 465). This enables fiction to address very real and serious issues (Allan et al., 2002; Phelan, 2017; Renfroe, 1998; Wolf, 2017).

In light of the contemplations at hand, it seems therefore entirely plausible to conceptualise stories, especially fantastic ones, as liminal experiences, which bears significance for the study at hand as Pine and Gilmore (2013) see experience offers which incorporate transformative elements as the future of the experience economy. In the context of escape rooms, transformations are undergone on different levels and at different stages: people transform in terms of their roles in the narrative process, in terms of their role within the narrative itself, and finally and perhaps most importantly in terms of possible insights and perspectives gained

through the filter of fiction. Thus, fantastic narratives can become a powerful tool for gently (or sometimes very overtly) encouraging people to reflect on themselves, others, or the world they live in, which accentuates their allure for creating transformative experiences.

4. Methodology

In this chapter, the means of validating the previously outlined arguments will be presented. As previously outlined, this thesis is attempting to shed a light on different sides of the experience co-creation process or in other words, elucidate the different aspects of narrative communication. To learn about the experience provider as both author and narrator of story-based service experiences, an analysis of escape room websites was conducted. This data is further complemented by interviews with the owners of the two escape rooms which represent the main subjects of this case. Secondly, in order to learn about the customer as character, co-author and narrator in their own right, observation sessions were conducted on the premises of the two Malmö escape rooms in question, directly followed by focus group interviews with the players. In doing so, the methodology of this thesis takes inspiration from the model of narrative communication, the particular use of which shall be discussed more closely in the following sections. This rather kaleidoscopic approach was chosen in hopes of elucidating the narrative themes at hand from as many different angles as possible, in order to see how they are communicated, transformed, and eventually re-told. If, throughout all of these perspectives, the fantastic still shines through clearly, it is hoped to make a stronger overall argument. A multi-faceted view, therefore, is deemed vital for the argumentation presented in this thesis, as it aspires to add a certain validity and stability to this exploratory study which otherwise lacks a single tried and tested framework, instead blending theories from the field of literary studies with social science theories and methods.

In order to elucidate how said theories were operationalised and used to further an understanding of the subject matter at hand, the following sections shall present the research design and rationale and the process of data collection- and analysis, including the methods used. Finally, the chapter will be rounded off with a reflection on ethical considerations as well as a critical discussion of the limitations of this study.

4.1 Research Strategy and Design

As a qualitative and narrative research effort, the focus of this study clearly lies on aspects like language and meaning, understanding reality as being socially constructed and based on shared experiences (Bryman, 2012; Howell, 2016). Experiences are something fundamentally subjective and individual, which is why a constructivist ontology quite naturally came to

underpin this research. Furthermore, in an interactive and co-creative case as the one of escape gaming, it would be folly to reject the notion that reality is shaped by human minds and interactions in a process of making sense of the world (Howell, 2016; Navon, 2001). Equally foolish would be the rejection of the importance of context since, in the case at hand, both greater socio-cultural context and immediate context are central elements which frame the narrative (see Czarniawska, 2004; Howell, 2016). It can therefore be argued that the co-creation of value in a service experience context is strongly influenced by social forces and contextual framing (Edvardsson et al., 2011), necessitating a research approach which recognises and addresses these aspects and implying a methodological position which involves the engagement in human existence and language (Howell, 2016). In fact, Czarniawska (2004) posits that making sense of documented events usually answers the question of 'why', a question quite typically associated with subjectivist, constructivist approaches to research (Bryman, 2012; Howell, 2016).

Just as the subject matter of escape rooms in an economy of experiences suggests a constructivist ontology, so do the basic assumptions and central focus points of constructivism, paired with the research focus on narratives, lead towards a hermeneutic epistemological standpoint built upon Bruner's (1986, 1991) notion of narrative knowledge. Stemming directly from the realm of literary studies, hermeneutics rejects the use of natural science methodologies for understanding social phenomena, focusing instead on lived experience (Howell, 2016). Subjectivity is considered a necessary part of the research process and, while categorisation is still useful, phenomena should never be studied separately from history, culture, or context (ibid.). This aspect can be found in the very formulation of the research issue at hand, since it is specifically in the context of the experience economy that fantastic narrative elements unfold their potential for value co-creation. For the study at hand, the co-construction of narrative meaning may be seen as influenced by practices of sense-making, stressing the interplay of structuralism and individual meaning in dynamic social situations. As hermeneutic approaches reject the notion of a separate and distanced neutral position of the interpreter (Howell, 2016), any research grounded in hermeneutics should be reflexively aware of the role of the researcher himself, as (s)he becomes the main tool for investigation, inevitably inserting their own preconceptions and experiences into the process (Howell, 2016; Josselson, 2006; Kim, 2016). For this study, it is important to keep in mind that in narrative research, analysis and interpretation often work side by side in an almost simultaneous process, which makes it "interpretive at every stage" (Josselson, 2006, p. 3). It must be stressed therefore that a certain level of interpretation, certainly based on the researcher's own interests and perception of the

escape room phenomenon, was involved from the very conceptualisation of this thesis, drawing on the fact that narrative researchers can never be outside of their studied subject or report things precisely objectively. Even in choosing what to represent, an interpretive decision is being made (Kim, 2016).

When it comes to narrative knowledge, therefore, it is important to note that it offers plausibility, but is not - and does not aim to be- verifiable in a positivistic sense, instead being interested in individual lived experiences (Bruner, 1986, 1991, 2002; Czarniawska, 2004). However, there are some hallmarks by which to distinguish plausible readings and interpretations of interest for the approach herein. No one has perhaps addressed the issues of valid interpretation more frequently than Umberto Eco (1979, 1981, 1990), who points out that interpretation becomes more fruitful when dealing with fictional universes, since in their case, "(…) we know without a doubt that they do have a message" (Eco, 1994, p. 116). While within a text, hermeneutics has the function of developing possible readings, extra-textually its task becomes to determine to what extent the text and its meaning are significant (West, 2009). Thus, texts can be seen as devices for producing possible worlds, including that of the fabula – the story itself – and that of the reader's expectations (Eco, 1979). Two useful interpretative tools mentioned by Eco (1990) are textual economy and internal coherence. The first can be described as "(…) a necessary limiting function" (Eco, 1990, p. 59), a set of parameters which helps the interpreter find a stance among the "(…) indefinite, but by no means infinite" possible interpretations a text allows for (ibid., p. 21). Secondly, Eco argues that while coherence does not automatically serve to identify good readings, it at the least allows for the exclusion of bad ones (West, 2009). The coherence of a reading, it should be noted, is always influenced by the narrative desire - the desire to see coherence - of the interpreting party which once again stresses the importance of self-reflexivity (Bryman, 2012; Howell, 2016; West, 2009). Hence, there needs to be a constant awareness that "subjectivity impinges upon all interpretation, context refuses to remain fixed, and distinctions between use and interpretation […] become blurred" (West, 2009, p. 35).

Overall, this exploratory investigation can perhaps best be described as a qualitative case study, as it seeks to provide a detailed analysis of a single case, trying to elucidate its complexity. What is under scrutiny here is a single phenomenon, a type of manifestation of the experience economy which is to be studied from a variety of different angles in order to provide a higher degree of validity and reliability for the arguments put forth (see Collins, 2010). There is a distinct awareness of the fact that the hermeneutic and narrative approach presented by this thesis, based on both the principles of economy (in the choice of certain genre elements as foci)

and coherence (in the hope of discovering patterns and elements across different methods) can yield knowledge and understanding, but will never, and does never intend to, produce the certainty of that knowledge in a positivistic sense. Therefore, this thesis is to be understood as one of a multitude (but, as Eco rightly says, not an infinity) of possible readings of hedonic narratives in the context of an economy of experiences (which, alas, is already evolving, prompting the inclusion of liminality and transformation). Being potentially erroneous, incomplete, and ever provisory lies in the nature of a reading, and thus by employing the tools of economy (delimitations) and coherence (across multiple methods) and proceeding reflexively, this reading will hopefully offer a compelling interpretation which has some extra-textual relevance for the study of experience narratives in a social science context.

4.2 Selection of Case and Methods of Data Collection

In order to examine the use of fantastic narratives in the co-creation of hedonic service experiences, the trend phenomenon of escape rooms was chosen as a suitable case. With their interactive and immersive gameplay, escape rooms can be seen as manifestations of experience economy businesses, since the clear focus seems to lie on creating a special event which people may autonomously transform into an experience, and the main value of which lies in being actively performed, remembered, and re-told (see Bisnow, 2017; Kolar, 2017; Lodi, 2017; Nicholson, 2016). For the investigation of fantastic themes in this thesis, two escape rooms in Malmö, Sweden, were selected as case subjects, both due to their geographical accessibility and because they possess certain qualities of interest. Firstly, both escape rooms are still relatively young, having debuted in Malmö just about half a year ago, making them ideal for finding out about the rationale behind their rather recently constructed narratives and experience offers. Moreover, both escape rooms are aiming to offer something extra, on top of the regular quizzes and puzzles normally found in classical escape rooms (see Nicholson, 2016). In both cases, this extra value-adding element is represented by an approach focused on providing guests with a story, which emphasises their ability to influence the overall game narrative and provides the entire experience with depth and detail. This story-based approach made these two particular escape rooms especially apt for the study at hand.

The data for this study was largely collected over the course of March 2018, with one previous pilot observation taking place during winter of 2017, when the idea for the project was just being formulated. Prior to data collection, a literature review was produced and, on the basis of the issues identified, a fieldwork plan was devised. The participants for observations and focus group interviews were selected due to their passion for- or curiosity about escape gaming, although not all of them necessarily had a general pre-formed interest and enthusiasm

for pop-culture or gaming. Great care was taken to include at least one person who had never played through an escape room before in each of the interviewed groups, in order to gage the impressions of both experienced and unexperienced players. A certain cultural – and age diversity was taken into account as well, with observation participants from Norway, Germany, Sweden, and the U.S. between the ages of 24 and 55. The spread of genders was also planned to be roughly equal among each group, although it is uncertain whether that factor would have a strong bearing upon this particular investigation. Levels of education, too, were relatively diverse ranging from high school graduates working in full-time jobs to university graduates still in the process of studying. It remains to be said, however, that despite all considerations the pool of participants remained homogeneous in the aspect of their overall Western cultural background, as well as their belonging to a relatively prosperous social sphere. As mentioned, the methods used in this study were chosen to illuminate both sides as well as the different levels of the process involved in narrative communication as illustrated in figure 2 below.
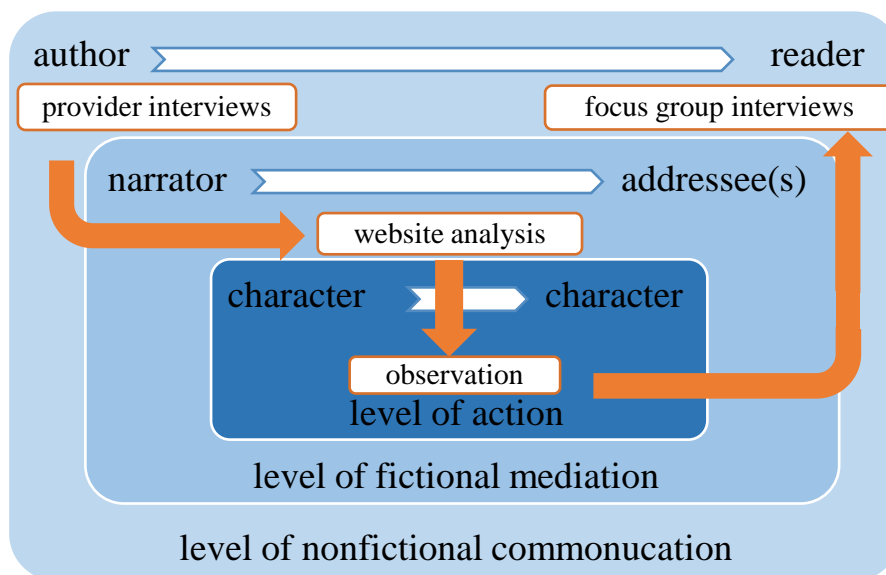
Figure 2:
Mapping of Methods. Adapted from (Jahn, 2017; Meyer, 2011, p. 68).

Interviews and website analyses served to elucidate how the providers, functioning as both authors and narrators, present and frame the offer in the form of a narrative to potential customers who initially, still assume the role of a passive audience. Here, the analytical focus was economised (in compliance with Eco) by creating categories pertaining to general narrative- as well as specifically fantastic elements. The same was done in preparation for the investigation of the recipient-turned-co-narrator perspective via observations and focus group interviews. Throughout, foci and categories were kept deliberately open in order to minimise the risk of what Eco (1990) calls overinterpretation, and prevent the construction of coherence

out of sheer narrative desire (see West, 2009). Moreover, fantastic elements were not overtly addressed during the fieldwork, so as to allow all participants to narrate within their own frame of reference.

Overall, while there can be no denying that the cultural-, academic-, and personal background and experience of the reader and interpreter of this data, who is of course now speaking as the narrator of this thesis, must needs have a bearing upon the reading presented herein, active precautions were taken at every step of the investigation to keep an open mind and self-reflexively guard against the risk of overinterpretation, leading to a constant hermeneutic circle of questioning oneself and asking the same questions repeatedly – a process which in itself is its very own tale of toils and trials. In hopes of having gained from it at least some small boon for the world of academia, the following sections shall present a short discussion of this approach, followed by an elaboration on each of the chosen methods in more detail, outlining how each was able to provide a distinct facet of understanding. An overview of the gathered data may be found below.

Method	Amount/Time	Type of Material
Individual Interviews	4/ 4h total	Transcripts
Document Study	14	Websites
	1/ 1h total	Video recording
	8	Written notes
Observations	4/ 8h total	Field notes
Focus Groups Interviews	2/ 4h total	Transcripts

Table 1:
Data Overview

4.2.1 Document Study

The narrative analysis of websites presented as part of this research was chosen in order to find out how escape room offers are framed for their audience. One particular challenge with such an analysis is often presented by a sensible limitation of the material (Rose, 2001). For this reason, a focus was placed on escape rooms in the county of Skåne and the Öresund region. Since the booking process typically takes place via a respective escape room's website, this was the visual, textual, and at times audiovisual material chosen for analysis. Since, with such an analysis, the content takes priority over the quantity of data, the decision was made to present a close reading of the websites belonging to the two escape rooms which came to constitute the main subjects of this study, while supplementing them with findings from other escape room websites pertaining to the chosen region, amounting to a total of fourteen websites considered. These documents were approached with the same sense of reflexivity that characterised this entire research, keeping in mind aspects of context and intertextuality (see Howell, 2016; Kim,

2016; Rose, 2001). From the general narrative categories of story and plot (see 3.1.2), the analysis moved on to elucidate whether some of the fantastic themes, motifs, and archetypes outlined in the previous chapter were to be found in the providers' framing of their experience offer. The choice of language and creation of mood via colour palettes, iconography, or even music, were central points in this regard.

Among the methods used, this document study formed the starting point and was chosen due to its readily available and very public form of material, which also serves to address the transmedial nature of experience narratives and subcreated worlds (see Bowen, 2009; Ecenbarger, 2016; Jenkins, 2007; Wolf, 2012). Furthermore, the fact that document studies often provide a perfect introduction to a phenomenon in a multi-method approach proved quite true in this case, since it facilitated an initial overview of a broader set of data, the insights from which could be taken on to inform the execution of other methods (Bowen, 2009).

4.2.2   Qualitative Interviews

The method of semi-structured interviewing was the second one chosen to round out the author/ narrator view of narrative communication. While the document analysis was able to show how the narrative is outwardly being framed in an online context, these interviews gave the providers themselves an opportunity to talk about how they understand and perceive their experience offer, revealing which value they hope to convey with it. An email outreach process towards escape rooms in the region of Skåne, and especially the city of Malmö, was initiated in February, 2018. After establishing contact, the providers of *The Alley* and *The Gatsby Maze* respectively were willing to talk about their experience as storytellers, and two interviews of roughly one hour were eventually conducted with a total of three people (as, in the latter case, two of the providers were being interviewed together). As the interview guide (appendix 3) shows, the central topics of conversation included the role and tasks of the provider, as well as the means and structure of their storytelling. The decision was made to place a correspondingly close focus on the readings of the websites of those particular escape rooms, in order to better complement the interview data and to more clearly elucidate the interplay of structure and framing.

This method was chosen because of its ability to reveal the way in which a certain group of people, in this case experience providers, perceives things, in this case the nature of their offer (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011; Mishler, 1986; Silverman, 2013). While normally, interviews are conducted among a larger group of people, the number of interviewees in this case was clearly restricted by the response rate to the initial outreach and the providers' actual willingness and time to have a conversation once contact had been established. However, Silverman (2013),

notes that qualitative interviews, due to the depth of the data they can generate, may also be conducted among a smaller number of people. Since there were some general topic areas which needed to be addressed, the semi-structured interview was elected as the most appropriate form. It provided the possibility to talk about all relevant areas, while giving participants leeway to set their own focus points draw attention to the things they perceived as important (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011; Silverman, 2013). It also provided the interviewer with more flexibility, so that spontaneous deviations, questions, and insertions were enabled, leading to a more natural dialogue (see May, 2011; Silverman, 2013). An interview guide was, as generally recommended (see Bryman, 2012; May, 2011; Silverman, 2013), prepared beforehand and referred to throughout the interviews. Nonetheless, the guide was not always strictly adhered to, with the sequence of questions varying and individual enquiries being spontaneously added during the conversation. The aforementioned central topics to be addressed were loosely based on the overall fieldwork strategy, and the providers were informed about the general topic of the thesis in advance (as part of the outreach process). The focus on the fantastic, however, was deliberately not divulged so as to keep a possible bias in the answers to a minimum and further support a certain level of reliability (see May, 2011).

Since the interviews were essentially being conducted between strangers and on the providers' premises, there were some initial concerns about building a comfortable, informal atmosphere and generating a pleasant level of rapport (see May, 2011; Silverman, 2013). This turned out to be less challenging than expected, largely due to the interviewees' openness and palpable enthusiasm for their work. Another challenge was the potential gap of understanding which might have been generated by the interviewees' unawareness of the main research focus (ibid.). Since they were, however, aware of the focus on storytelling and narratives, the interviews nevertheless allowed for a full coverage of all desired topic areas while allowing fantastic elements to emerge quite organically. Finally, the largest challenge was one of ethics, since one provider seemed to be quite aware of the nature of the information being shared, while the others did not, during the flow of the dialogue, actively constrain their explanations. As this was not the only ethical challenge to emerge over the course of this investigation, it will be addressed separately and in more detail during the last section of this chapter. A full overview of the interview material, including the two expert interviews, can be seen in the table below.

Interview (Token)	Name (Token)	Occupation	Date	Time
Expert 1	**Cassinger, C.**	Strategic Communication researcher & lecturer, Lund University	20.02.2018	~60min.
Expert 2	**Nicholson, S.**	Professor of game design and development, Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford, Ontario	09.04.2018	~60min.
Provider 1	**E. and S.**	Escape Room Providers	27.02.2018	~60min.
Provider 2	**J.**	Escape Room Provider	27.02.2018	~60min.

Table 2:
Overview – Semi-structured interviews and expert talks.

As indicated, two rather different kinds of interviews were conducted. With regard to the strategy of data collection according to narrative communication, the expert talks stand somewhat outside of the model. As the debate about the reliability and validity of such interviews revolves around the role and trustworthiness of an expert (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009; Dorussen, Lenz, & Blavoukos, 2005), it should be stressed that the academics at hand were chosen as trustworthy sources due to the perceived relevance of their respective works, which drew the researcher's attention. Additionally, a talk with Ms. Cassinger was explicitly recommended by the thesis supervisor. This talk took place in the early stages of the project, in hopes of more firmly grounding the research approach in academia. Bogner, Littig, and Menz (2009) also recommend this method as a more efficient means of gathering data at an exploratory stage. Mr. Nicholson, on the other hand, provided access and condensed information about escape gaming, a field which had, by the time of the interview, already proven itself to be difficult to access. Providing access, condensing information, and helping to ground exploratory research are seen among the benefits of expert interviewing (see Bogner et al., 2009; Dorussen et al., 2005). Of course, there always remains the question of true information, as with any other material used herein. The ontological and epistemological stance taken, however, should have made it clear that individual insights rather than objective truths formed the main object of interest. In all, talking to experts from both social science and game design provided much needed raison d'être for this project and inspired critical re-evaluations of factors which had previously been taken for granted (e.g. escape rooms as experiences).

4.2.2.1 Focus Group Interviews

In order to round out the information on the customers' behaviour, and to find out what happens when people become narrators of their own experiences, two focus group interviews of two hours were held with the observed players immediately after their respective games. The groups chosen were of course those in which the researcher was not present as a participant observer

during the game. Each group consisted of four people, which is typically the maximum amount of players for an escape room. Due to unforeseen circumstances, one player and interviewee had to fill in and ended up being present in both groups. Care was taken to conduct the interviews as promptly as possible after each group's game, the idea being that their experience would still be quite present in the interviewees' minds, and less distorted by temporal distance (see Prebensen et al., 2014b). The idea was furthermore to use the phase of fresh excitement to an advantage, since there is typically a strong need to talk about the experienced immediately following the game (Nicholson, 2016). In order to strengthen the notion of pre-, during-, and after experience stages, participants were even asked to write down their expectations for the upcoming escape game based on the impressions conveyed by the websites of the respective room they were about to play. During the interview, they were then confronted with these notes.

Focus group interviews seemed an ideal method for this stage of the research since interviewing is generally regarded as one of the best methods for eliciting narratives (see Collins, 2010; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Mishler, 1986) and since the focus group was originally derived from the idea of an interview where "people who were known to have had a certain experience could be interviewed in a relatively unstructured way about that experience" (Bryman, 2012, p. 503) – which was exactly the intent behind the use of this method here. Moreover, focus groups have already proven successful for understanding game play experiences in particular (Eklund, 2015). Since many authors make a distinction between group interviews and a focus group (see Bryman, 2012; May, 2011), these sessions should be explicitly identified as focus groups interviews, as the format was quite open and participants were talking to each other most of the time, with only a relaxed amount of moderation.

The intent behind this was twofold. On the one hand, it gave participants freedom to address what they deemed relevant, enabling them to construct their own narrative without any considerable framing by the moderator while also being able to discuss and critically reflect on the experience (Bryman, 2012; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). On the other hand, both Czarniawska (2004) and Elliott (2005), when writing about eliciting narratives in interviews, seem to regard a situation resembling a regular conversation as the most important requirement, since storytelling is rather common in natural everyday dialogue and people often refer to familiar narrative constructs when trying to formulate their personal insights. Moreover, interrupting the conversational flow with too many interview questions may be highly disruptive to the narrative being constructed (Elliott, 2005). Therefore, great care was taken to provide a comfortable, informal setting and, although an interview guide was developed for these sessions as well, it was probably the one least directly referred to, resulting in only a few

questions being put explicitly to the group and then letting the conversation develop, occasionally asking for further reflection or clarification. The overall topic of the conversation, however, was clearly defined as being the preceding play-through, and the focus of interest lay upon the collective construction of meaning (see Bryman, 2012; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). This process of sense-making has also made the focus group interview popular in cultural- and media studies, as it mirrors the hermeneutic view of meaning being not a property inherent and stable in any work, but dependent on how it is experienced and interpreted (see Bruner, 1991; Bryman, 2012; Eco, 1979; Howell, 2016; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). As such, focus groups have become a popular method for gaging audience interpretations and ways of understandings (Bryman, 2012; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Due to these properties, focus groups presented an ideal addition to the methods used in this investigation. An overview of the focus group interviews can be found in the table below.

Group No.	Date/ Game time	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation	Escape Rooms Played*
1	16.03.18/ ~110 min	26	f	USA	Student	1
		24	m	GER	Student	1
		27	m	GER	Pharmacist	1
		26	m	SWE	Student	0
2	30.03.18/ ~115 min	51	f	GER	Human Resource Management	1
		54	f	GER	Hospital Administration	0
		27	m	GER	Pharmacist	1
		44	f	GER	Quality Management	1

Table 3:
Overview of focus group interviewees.
*Pertains to the number of rooms played prior to participation in this study.

It is important to note that just because focus groups can produce different perspectives on a topic than individual interviews, the information gathered from them still only represents the opinion of a relatively small group of people and should not be confused with trends in an entire population (May, 2011). In addition to that, the information presented in this thesis will, of course, clearly not represent the unfiltered participant narrative but rather an interpretation of it by the researcher (Czarniawska, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Howell, 2016). It is thus subject to the same potential pitfalls of hermeneutic investigations than all the data gathered and analysed, and was addressed in the same way – by repeated questioning of- and grappling with the material.

4.2.3 Observations

In order to elucidate how people react to- and immerse themselves in the offered framing and gain insights into customers' role in co-creating their experience narrative, three observations were conducted on the premises of the two aforementioned escape rooms. For this type of method, where firm assumptions about relevance are usually not just determined beforehand (see May, 2011), it seemed somewhat more difficult to adequately decide upon categories for investigation. Therefore, an earlier play-through of a different room was used as a pilot study, amounting to a total of roughly eight hours of material from four different groups. While the playing of a room traditionally consists of one hour of very dense and continuous action, phases before and after play were also observed in a mirroring of typical experience phases as mentioned in chapter two (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2014a; Prebensen et al., 2014b). Participants for this part of the research were chosen as indicated previously, with consideration given to their age, cultural background, level of education, and profession.

This method was deemed most appropriate for this part of the research due to the flexibility it grants, the immersion it requires, and the richness of the data it yields (see May, 2011). In the attempt to understand and empathise with participants' ways of sense-making, observations proved a most useful tool. In this process, the observer's role ranged from being a participant observer (in two cases) to being a complete, outside observer (see Bryman, 2012; May, 2011). Here, the participant observer sessions preceded the ones as outside observer, in order to initially gain a first-hand understanding of the context, which subsequently facilitated the process of empathising during subsequent sessions. The participants were aware of being observed for the purpose of a thesis in all of the cases and the setting could be described as a rather closed one, being restricted to just one room at a time (Bryman, 2012). The focus of attention was placed on patterns or similarities, and whether they – despite the uniqueness of each social interaction – were displayed even between different groups and settings (see May, 2011). Once again as recommended (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011), an observation protocol was developed after the pilot run, including areas of interest such as story, world, or characters and paying special attention to language, behaviour, and reactions to out-of-the-ordinary oddities and occurrences. Field notes were drawn up either during- or immediately after the observation sessions(Bryman, 2012). Like the interview guide, the observation protocol was derived from the initial fieldwork strategy and represents an attempt to operationalise both general narrative- and genre-specific theory. Nevertheless, categories were deliberately kept open in order to forestall projection.

Another issue typically connected with observations is that of access (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011). In this case, the groups of participants were quite readily available, as escape gaming generally represents a fun activity that many were willing to try out. Moreover, the nature of escape rooms already implies observation by an outside party (usually the provider or a member of staff) to facilitate the flow of the game (see Nicholson, 2016). Therefore, issues regarding access were not to be found in the form of a sceptical group of participants. In terms of the providers, however, access proved much harder to gain, since it involved going 'backstage' with the staff during a play-through. Luckily, however, the providers in case were open to granting a few of these special opportunities. This naturally required a special set of ethical considerations, which will be more closely addressed in the penultimate section of this chapter.

4.3 Analytical Process

After conducting the fieldwork, the entirety of data was spread out across a variety of different methods and forms. In order to analyse this varied material and the different angles it represents, and to be able to effectively emplot it, a qualitative analytical approach was first taken which, as some researchers argue, may be applied to multiple kinds of documented communication besides interview transcripts (Kim, 2016; Mayring, 2010). Stressing the importance of context, Kim (2016) recommends a process of broadening (looking beyond the case of the data), burrowing (looking at the data in detail), and restorying. Broadening was provided by the literature review, which helped keep the socio-cultural- and research context in mind at all times. A narrative approach was then taken in order to analyse the data after initial coding, re-emplotting it and thus reflecting a complementation of structuralism and Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis (see also Kim, 2016). In this process, genre elements were identified by virtue of recognisable repetition (see 3.1.3, Czarniawska, 1999). This process turned out to be challenging due to three main aspects.

Firstly, the collected data, especially from observations and websites, proved extremely rich, with observed play-throughs consisting of 60 minutes of condensed, meaningful action and almost constant communication, and websites containing a vast amount of both visual- and audio-visual material. This richness made it challenging to condense, especially since the researcher's own background as a student of literature resulted in a tendency to meticulously analyse every single word and colour-choice at length. Eco's principle of economising, therefore, turned out to be a difficult process as it was feared to take away the value of a close and detailed reading. Secondly, a large amount of the data turned out to contain sensitive information pertaining to solutions of the actual puzzles in the respective rooms. Because of

this, it was necessary to go through all of the data and remove any information which may reveal the solutions to solving the rooms and which would, if published, effectively ruin their playing value. As to information about the stories and plots used in the rooms, the information publicly available on the websites as well as the providers' own answers served as a guideline for how much to divulge. Thirdly, due to the different material yielded by each method, it became highly challenging to balance between structural interpretation and the narrative mode of thinking. Thus, the process of analysis resulted in multiple stages of coding (Saldana, 2009), initially merely summarising central topics and categories among the data before applying the fantastic lens in further coding processes to analyse- and thereby re-emplot the data. The first stages of coding represented the empirical findings as determined by classical content analysis, rendering the themes that emerged as prominent. This data was then analysed and re-emplotted, attempting to respect the individual voices of participants while at the same time showing how they can be interpreted in the context at hand, reflecting the fact that none of the steps taken in writing this thesis is entirely free of interpretation (see Josselson, 2006; Kim, 2016). Therefore, the fantastic and the narrative mode of thinking formed the basis for the final data presentation, tying it together into a coherent experience narrative, almost in the sense of a meta-narrative which arches across the individual stories of the material (see Corvellec, 2015). Moreover, Czarniawska's (2004) strategy for transporting narratives from the field of practice into the field of research (see fig. 3), which also involves a process of deconstruction and re-emplotment as reflected in the different stages of coding employed here was a constant point of orientation while working with the data.
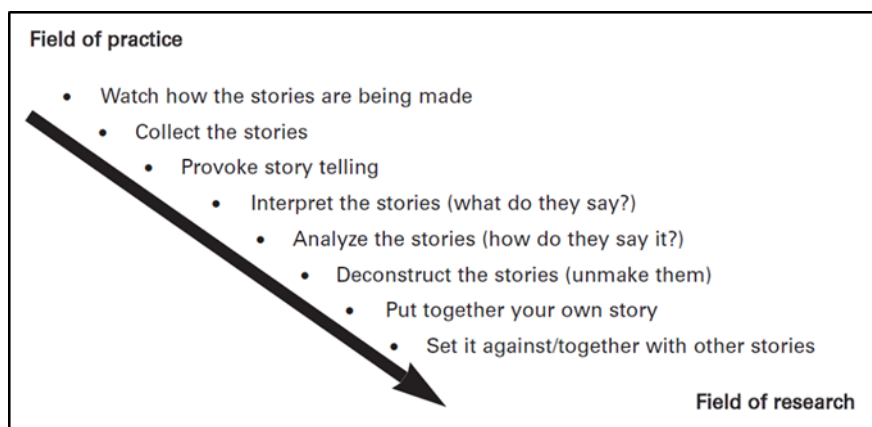

Figure 3:
A narrative approach to social science (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 15).

Since narrative thinking seems to form the researcher's general frame of existence, it added perhaps another difficulty to the analysis process. Escape rooms had, from the beginning of thesis work and inspired by the very first pilot observation, been viewed as experience offers

on the one hand, and a storytelling medium on the other. The expert interview with Scott Nicholson, however, made it clear that many providers in the industry do not perceive their offers as such, believing themselves to be primarily game designers and giving little thought to any experience phases other than "during". Although Mr. Nicholson agreed that this might be an erroneous assumption on the industry's part (see also Nicholson, 2016), it became clear that much additional theorising would be necessary in order to explain what had been assumed as given. In terms of individual treatment of the material, interviews were prepared for by an interview guide, which was reviewed by the thesis supervisor prior to use. Afterwards, all interview material was first listened to and then transcribed, including details such as pauses, pace, stresses and tone of voice in order to render the speaker's meaning as accurately as possible (Bryman, 2012). While transcribing, codes were already starting to form – however, as mentioned, processes of re-coding took place, resulting in a repeated perusal of the finished transcripts followed by the aforementioned process of editing out sensitive data. The initial website analyses began with a thorough reading or viewing, followed by a coding process based on the repetition of descriptive codes. From these, larger patterns were then derived (Saldana, 2009). Once again, a re-coding and re-emplotting process took place subsequently. Finally, when processing observation data, actions, events, and language (whenever it could be determined) formed the basis of themes and categories which also went on to be emplotted with the rest of the data.

Overall, the process of data analysis represented an attempt at straddling both arts-based and social science research, which resulted in a multitude of challenges which were addressed to the best of the researcher's knowledge. As the reflections above already indicate, the research process was strongly characterised by ethical issues, the entirety of which shall be summed up and addressed in the following section.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Many authors agree that any work of social science research should closely consider the principles of moral behaviour, since the subject matter is generally humans and their opinions and practices (May, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Since the research conducted for this thesis required the involvement of multiple kinds of participants, the potential benefits and risks they may be faced with were carefully assessed from the outset. Ethical concerns were thus a constant part of the research process, arising across different methods.

First of all, all participants of interviews – both focus group and individual – were guaranteed personal anonymity and given the right to withdraw at any time. For focus group participants, this possibility was especially important in case the discussions got too heated or

uncomfortable, while for escape room providers, it presented the opportunity to decline lines of questioning which they perceived as too intrusive. Furthermore, all interviewees were, as recommended by Silverman (2013), previously informed about the overall purpose and subject of the research, which gave them the opportunity to assess whether they could contribute to it and were interested in doing so. As mentioned earlier, aspects of the fantastic were deliberately not openly raised, in order to allow for more unbiased narratives, but all participants were aware of the experience- and narrative focus of the project. In handling the data gathered from the provider- and focus group interviews and observations, special care needed to be taken as the contents of escape rooms are usually kept secret and the market is a highly competitive one (Nicholson, 2016). As it is detrimental for information about escape rooms to be publicly available, the data used for this thesis was treated as highly sensitive and measures were taken to protect information which might be valuable to the businesses (see Silverman, 2013), resulting in redacted transcripts being used to perform the final analysis. When, for example, a provider would reveal the solution to one of the rooms' puzzles while contextualising their answer, that information would be redacted from the final transcript so as to protect the company's business secrets and preserve the playing value of their product. The same rationale was naturally applied for the observation- and interview material gathered as well as in one particular case, where a recording was made of the play-through so as to allow for a more detailed observation. Here, a special agreement was drawn up between researcher and provider, guaranteeing the protection of the recording which, if published, would of course make playing the room redundant for any future customers. The agreement was drafted in consultation with the thesis supervisor and after reassurance from the course supervisor that the material would not have to be published as part of the thesis. The security of this material is further paramount in order to protect the anonymity of the participants featuring in the material, which leads directly to the ethical concerns involved in with observations. For complete observations, providers agreed to let the researcher step behind the proverbial scenes, again under assurance that any sensitive data would be treated with confidentiality. Participants, of course, also had to give their informed consent to being observed for research purposes (see Silverman, 2013), resulting in the drafting of a second research agreement in consultation with the thesis supervisor. Thus, all participants in complete observation scenarios gave not only their verbal- but also their written consent to be part of the investigation. As these deliberations show, it was paramount to produce a considerable amount of material devoted to planning and security throughout the research process. All of the material used in the context of this research,

including interview- and observation protocols as well as research agreements can be found for further consideration in the appendix of this thesis.

4.5 Discussing Limitations

When discussing the benefits and shortcomings of this research project reflectively, it needs to be noted that it is not without its limitations. Firstly, narrative meaning always bears certain complexities, since there is no way to gain access to somebody else's realm of meaning completely. Thus, there is always a certain question about the trustworthiness of data, as each narrating voice and each story may be driven by different influences (Bryman, 2012; Kim, 2016). In terms of interviews, the trustworthiness of data was addressed by keeping the bias of fantasy out of the questions (see interview guides, appendix 3). Since all participants were able to answer the questions put to them reflexively and thoroughly and the data was largely corroborated by observations, the collected narratives were taken as plausible accounts. Following the ontological and epistemological position of this thesis, however, it must once more be stressed that individual perceptions had greater priority than objective truth, as the entire point of narratives is that they open up viewpoints, irrespective of being true or false (Bruner, 1986, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004). The main reason the author gained trust in the material as a whole was the use of multiple methods. This way, each method presented both a means of generating data as well as an instance of control against the information drawn from other sources while the additional expert talks served to ground the research itself in an academic context (Bryman, 2012; Collins, 2010). Secondly, one should also critically reflect on the use of fantasy as a theoretical lens, since modern – especially Tolkienian - fantasy represents a deeply Westernised concept, making this study culturally and temporally bound. This is perhaps even intensified by the fact that all participants were citizens of rather wealthy Western countries, which on the one hand fits the frame of the experience economy (see Delimitations, Boswijk et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999), but on the other hand excludes voices from cultural contexts such as Asia, where escape gaming has also been identified as a popular phenomenon (Nicholson, 2016). Thirdly, concepts within experience research, narrative analysis, and genre are notoriously fuzzy, challenges that were attempted to address via thorough overviews (James & Mendlesohn, 2012; Nilsen & Dale, 2013; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013; Todorov, 1973). Finally, while examining data across all stages of communication was supposed to provide this study with stability and validity (e.g. Collins, 2010), it also resulted in a multitude of used methods and perhaps a rather small amount of data within each single method. The reluctance of many escape room providers to share what they perceived as their secrets made the attainment of a large amount of interview- and observation

data a rather challenging task. It was hoped, however, that the richness of narrative data (e.g. Barthes & Duisit, 1975; May, 2011) could somewhat alleviate this shortcoming.

On the other hand, by making use of the levels of narrative communication, this approach has the potential to elucidate different means of storytelling, framing, and sense-making across all stages of the experience. Moreover, with regard to the subject matter of escape rooms it helps to distinguish between fictional- and nonfictional communication, drawing attention to the different roles and functions of people across the experience phases. Furthermore, this approach may be helpful in making different voices in the process of experience co-creation heard, presenting a certain reverence for the individuality of experiences (see Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Prebensen et al., 2014a). Additionally, the data gathered in this way enable a re-emplotment of the overall findings as a coherent narrative with a beginning of the causal chain before- and an (open) ending after the experience (see Corvellec, 2015; Czarniawska, 2004; Kim, 2016). In terms of reliability and validity, this approach is oriented on positions which stress the importance of triangulation, context-sensitivity, a thorough engagement with the subject matter and profound analysis as well as a reflexive stance, which have been addressed throughout this chapter (Bryman, 2012; Collins, 2010). This stance was taken to be more fitting for a narrative analysis grounded in hermeneutics where reliability becomes a process instead of a product, as many classical notions of reliability and validity are still strongly based on quantitative rationales and thus paradigmatic conceptualisations of knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2013; Syed & Nelson, 2015). Having discussed the means and rationale of data collection, the following sections shall present the re-emplotted findings in an analytical effort.

5. Analysis: Framing Experiences as Fantastic Narratives

The structure of the sub-sections presented in the following arose from an operationalisation of the theory aided by the respective fieldwork guides. With regard to the thesis aim of how fantastic elements can contribute to a better understanding of hedonic experience co-creation, the research questions call for an examination of the process and dialogue surrounding the case at hand. In order to examine the co-creation process from a narrative angle, the monomyth was operationalised as a reflection of the three experience phases (Prebensen et al., 2014b). Throughout these, communication takes place on different levels, which is why attention needed to be paid to both the manner and matter of storytelling (see 3.1.2). The Tolkienian theories of the fantastic were operationalised as reflecting the value of fantasy through processes of sense-making, reflection, and exploration, echoing the notions of deeper human desires addressed by this genre (see Fabrizi, 2016; Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Kramer, 2017; Tolkien, 1983). While methods were designed to cover different levels of narrative

communication, the information in the following will be presented holistically (see Kim, 2016). The final section shall, however, return to the model of narrative communication once more, attempting to make sense of the findings in relation to it. Moreover, it is important to note once more that the entire escape room experience, beyond just the 60 minutes of gameplay, is being taken into consideration here. The analyses in the following are therefore presented in hopes of generating a reading of escape rooms as enchanting experiences, which might bear a wider significance and implications for both the theory and practice of hedonic experiences. In examining how fantastic elements can contribute to a better understanding of hedonic experience co-creation and attempting to validate the outlined theoretical approach, the following sections will lead the reader through the co-creation process at hand, which is emplotted as a fantastical hero's journey. Leading through this journey is important since it will uncover the different processes of exploration, framing, and sense-making taking place throughout the experience, thereby showing how fantasy addresses customers on a human level of desire (Belk et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kramer, 2017; Tolkien, 1983). Therefore, the analysis is structured in three steps according to the experience phases (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2014b), and the hero's journey (Campbell, 2004).

5.1 Before: Experience Provision as Art

Before entering the narrative itself, it is important to point out the provider's role as a storyteller and artist, in order to understand how the creation of hedonic service experiences is perceived by them. With regard to the research aim, this section illustrates how such perceptions can lead to the generation of additional value through storytelling. In the interviews conducted with escape room providers, it quickly became clear that their self-perception seems to differ somewhat from other such providers who, as Nicholson mentioned, still seem to perceive themselves as game designers first and foremost. This is also reflected in the following quotes by one of the interviewees:

> *"escape gaming in the beginning was barely more than a room full of furniture, padlocks, boxes and keys. […] that was obviously interesting enough to kick off the whole process, but things evolve and change"/ "we started by basically trying to tell a nice and enjoyable crime story and then […] realised that (.) that is not where it has to end, we can make that bigger and (.) like instil it with more meaning"*   *(Provider 2)*

All of the providers described themselves as storytellers, perceiving their work as experiential because it has, as the quotes above show, a deeper meaning. A very personal relationship to the work was clearly detectable: Designing an escape room was described as a "creative process" involving "a lot of blood, sweat and tears" (P2). They stressed that providing the experience is

not seen as a "get rich quickly scheme, but [as] something that grows and that is really […] our baby. So we're a bit like artists here" (P2). This sentiment was underlined by statements like "the appreciation of the room […] that's part of our payment"(P2). Equally, providers 1 described the process of watching customers interact with the rooms as "the best part" and "the hardest part to let go" once they were no longer present at every game themselves. They also understood their role as artists to include a certain responsibility for providing customers with a good experience: "that's also not a way we want to like ideologically work with art (laughs) like […] you didn't have a good time? Well, it's your fault". P2 strongly echoes this sentiment, stating that it is his job to

> *"tell [the players] how their game was and […] make sure it was a good game (.) which is actually quite simple, because people don't play bad games, they usually just have bad luck […] you have to tell them where they did well. And everybody did well somewhere."*

This short section already shows that by perceiving themselves as storytellers and artists, providers themselves seem to develop a personal relationship to their work, which then seems to inspire a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring positive experiences. This notion becomes important later on, when the providers themselves enter the narrative as characters.

5.1.1   The Call to Adventure

Overall, the narrative begins before the actual game truly starts: in the pre-experience phase. Here, the website is an important tool to frame customers in their roles as heroes, drawing them out of their reluctance provided by an ever-increasing amount of offers (see Campbell, 2004; Nicholson, 2016). On a level of fictional mediation, customers are ensnared and drawn into a compelling narrative. At this stage, narrative meaning is still strongly formed structurally, as the customer is in the passive role of a reader, taking in the information supplied by the provider and only becoming active in forming interpretations and expectations based on it (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Eco, 1981; Fludernik, 2005). This means that in order to examine this stage of the process, a look needs to be taken at the sites' language and imagery which frame the reader and potential customer as the hero of their narrative, as will be demonstrated by a reading of *The Gatsby Maze* and *The Alley*, supplemented by the information gathered from the other sites.

 The Alley most obviously transports its framing through the use of language. The imperative "Accept the Challenge!" is almost used as a catchphrase, appearing in large lettering right at the beginning of the page, highlighted by a broad red bar which immediately draws the eye (The Alley, 2018a). In addition, the FAQ text clearly spells out that "you and your friends can be the heroes", while being "equipped with nothing but a bit of background story and your

wits" (The Alley, 2018b). These phrases serve as an allusion to the amount of trials awaiting the reader, while also making them feel uniquely valued: if you succeed, it is only due to your own wits. This framing of the customer-as-hero can further be found in the description of the individual adventures. While *The Ancient Mystery* states that "Now, it is up to you to uncover the secrets of our ancestors", *The Last Hand* proclaims that "[…] it will be on you to decide our future" (The Alley, 2018a). Besides singling out the potential customer as the hero who has been awaited, the text accompanying The Last Hand also employs the boon-imagery which is characteristic of the monomyth, by suggesting that the aforementioned changes to the future can only be made "If you can figure the plan out" (ibid.). Thus, by virtue of passing the trials presented by the room, the customer-as-hero effectively earns the right to their final boon: influencing the story themselves and choosing their own ending. The boon is also visually displayed in both of the images accompanying the descriptions, with *The Ancient Mystery* quite overtly showing a brightly illuminated treasure at the centre of a stone altar. The stained glass image of the golden key accompanying *The Last Hand* meanwhile, may be seen as an image of the hero's hand reaching out for the ultimate boon, represented by the key (see image 1 appendix 1). Finally, it is important to note that in each case, the stakes of the adventure are being framed as the very highest ones. *The Last Hand* tasks the reader with determining the future of humanity by deciding between an old- and new world order, while *The Ancient Mystery* calls upon them to "be the protector of human life" (ibid.). The framing, therefore, once more resembles that of a fantastic- or at the very least monomythical hero, who is called upon to accomplish an extraordinary task during which the highest stakes are involved. In particular, the decision posed by *The Last Hand* recalls the high-fantasy trope of having to make a moral decision based on what is perceived as good or evil (see Fabrizi, 2016; Hammond, 2018; Senior, 2012).

While *The Gatsby Maze* does not actively employ the label of hero, a similar framing can nevertheless be detected. First off, the reader is once again singled out as "the right one", and challenged to "be the one who secures the safety of our society" (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a). This trope is taken almost to an extreme in the trailer video which accompanies the text, during which the fictional M.A.Z.E. Corporation's commissioner is talking directly to the camera and the audience, pointing directly at the viewer multiple times in an Uncle-Sam-gesture while stating "this is why we need you" and asking "are you the chosen one?" (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a 01:07 and 01:28). Especially the latter choice of words reflects a common fantastic hero trope, implying that only the hero has the special ability needed to fulfil the task at hand and is thus destined to it (see Campbell, 2004; Croft, 2012). Again, the stakes of the adventure at hand are being framed as high, asking the customer-as-hero to "change the world", to save "millions

of lives and [end] crimes against humanity" (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a). The fact that many of the challenges are put forth in the form of questions seems just as evocative as the imperative found on the page of *The Alley*, especially because they are already being answered by the fictional company saying "we know you are the right one" (ibid.). Overall, the reader is being directly addressed, singled out, made feel special, and called upon to fulfil a specific, high-stakes task.

Some of the other websites made direct references to the customer-as-hero much as *The Alley* does, .e.g. framing them as "the hero of a special story" (Sevenloft, 2018). This notion also found expression in the nature of the tasks offered. In describing these tasks, themes of questing, adventure, and mystery abound, with three websites even employing either of the concepts in their very name (Mystery Makers, Timequest, Questrooms). Others promise an "amazing" (ExitGames, 2018) or "unforgettable" adventure (Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018). Many websites promise "a world full of mysteries and secrets" (Timequest, 2018) outright, others allude to the concept by indicating that things in the room might be different from what they are in the reader's day-to-day reality (e.g. Breakout Sweden, 2018; Escape-cph, 2018; Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018). Once again, quests were framed as having extremely high stakes like saving "all mankind"(Midgaard Event, 2018), or require someone or something needing to be saved or protected (Breakout Sweden, 2018; BreakoutRoom.dk, 2017; Timequest, 2018) . Often, a rather overt call to the reader in the form of a challenge (e.g. Sevenloft, 2018) or a plea (e.g. Midgaard Event, 2018) was displayed. Imperatives like "be the next hero of the world" and absolutes like being "lost forever" (BreakoutRoom.dk, 2017) generally served to strengthen this notion and convey the feeling that the reader (or the group of players) was being singled out as the hero of the narrative. As demonstrated by the previous analyses, the hero-theme is often accompanied by the existence of a boon. By the very nature of an escape room of course, a non-fictional boon always present is a successful escape or completion of the mission one is tasked with. Often, however, the fictional stories of rooms also revolve around classical boons represented by mystical objects such as rune stones (Clockedin.dk, 2017; Escape-cph, 2018) or even the Holy Grail (Escape House Lund, 2018; Midgaard Event, 2018). Thus, while types of boons range from the very materialistic like gold and silver (Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018), to the highly cerebral like achieving salvation (Sevenloft, 2018), they formed a prominent feature in the framing of the examined online presentations. Additionally, the immersion in a story itself often became a non-fictional boon advertised by providers (Mystery Makers, 2018; Sevenloft, 2018; Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018; Timequest, 2018). The hope of getting to be immersed in a story was also clearly

expressed by focus group participants when asked to write down their expectations prior to their play-through. Escape gaming, in this context, then attains dual meaning referring to both the literal goal of escaping the room as well as reflecting the Tolkienian notion of escaping into a different story or reality which waits to be discovered (Bratman, 2016; Honegger, 2010; Northrup, 2004; Tolkien, 1983). This aspect is also mirrored in the game concept of *The Alley*, where, as P2 explained, the goal no longer even is to break out, but to get deeper and deeper into a playable story.

On the basis of these motifs and their use, it can be said that provider websites strongly attempt to supply a call to adventure for the reader, framing them in the role of a chosen hero in order to advertise an escape from reality and generate a feeling of individual valuation which may incite a booking. In terms of experience co-creation, this process reflects a way of addressing the notions of consumer autonomy and experience customisation (e.g. Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Snel, 2013) through narration: framing the customer-as-hero communicates individual valuation while subtly directing expectations based on the use of familiar genre-motifs (Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Senior, 2012; Todorov, 1973). One could say that by making the booking, stepping out of passivity and thereby accepting the call to adventure, the customer starts their hero's journey, ceasing to be a mere reader and actively entering into the narrative of the provider.

5.2 During: Entering Another World

After a successful call to adventure, the process continues when customers are on-site, at what might be described as the level of action. In the interviews, providers described the course of their experience roughly as follows. P1 stressed that their plot already begins outside: "from the beginning […] even before they enter […] they're picked up by an actor who's in character". Once inside, a rough outline of the experience looks as follows: "the first part is just acting it's like 20 minutes of monologue more or less, and then we have 10 minutes of VR experience […] and then we have the escape room, and then back to VR and back to acting" (P1). Initially, players are given an introduction, or "kick-off" (P2). This is described as a necessary process to "ease into the story, get in some sort of mind-set […] giving them the opportunity to experience the story in a more informed way" (P2). Observations showed that this phase is often accompanied by the presence of smaller test-puzzles for players to try out as a sort of practice. Usually, players are given some sort of task at this point, which can be just to escape (see e.g. Breakout Sweden, 2018; BreakoutRoom.dk, 2017), but it can also consist of finding a certain object (e.g. Escape House Lund, 2018; Midgaard Event, 2018; Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018),

or playing towards making a decision about the story's ending (The Alley, 2018a). After the introduction, "the players are pushed into the darkness […] and then the room takes over" (P2). During the play-through, guidance and constant framing is provided from the outside while the gameplay follows a non-linear structure of riddles, which has a "walkthrough like for a 'normal' story […] so that when you design it you want to make sure like how do people go through it, what information do we disclose when, and how can we keep it hidden until then?" (P2). Help can usually be obtained from the provider, a process that often takes a rather ritualistic shape. In one case, players had to return to a certain spot and call out their guide's name in order to receive help in a process reminiscent of a fairy tale or religious invocation (Power, 1994). Afterwards, one participant - by way of a Freudian slip - even described it as having to "pray for help" (Group 2). Even where invocations were not required, players frequently treated the advice-giving medium like a live character in the room, talking to it, asking it questions, reacting to it, or even just looking over at it whenever they were starting to feel lost. Storytelling in this phase can happen via audio recordings of narration, "story bits and pieces" to be found in the room (P2), or by means of the provider "constantly framing" (P1) the players' actions. The main aspect which makes storytelling challenging at this stage seems to be that of time:

> *"the players spend sixty minutes in our room, but we don't have sixty minutes to really tell a story. So the crucial parts must be condensed into whatever somebody decides how much space the story should have. Because it needs to be listened to, it needs to be read, it needs to be connected to - and that's all time that you take away from the puzzle solving and in the end it's the puzzle solving that moves you forward"* (P2)

Therefore, any ways to increase opportunities for storytelling can be seen as beneficial for generating immersion and enchantment.

Bit by bit, players are lead up to several larger reveals and indicators are put in place to signal the approach of the game's culmination. This feeling is often enhanced by the use of a musical score which swells to an ever-more dramatic pace. Finally, both offers observed were characterised as having a free choice of the ending, or different possible endings. For P2, the ending is solved by providing a non-fictional debriefing phase: "when they did not finish the story, […] I tell them okay you could have found this and that and you solve it like that (.) so just to – for everybody to reach the end, this is part of the debriefing". All in all, it quickly becomes clear how the structure of the play-throughs resembles Campbell's (2004) monomythical journey. Firstly, players are welcomed by an entity who introduces them to the venue and provides them with their task. In what can be seen as an initiation or rite of passage, players undergo a phase of darkness or – in the case of the *Gatsby Maze* – a time travel tunnel which takes them down the proverbial rabbit hole (see also The Gatsby Maze, 2018a) before

they find themselves in the strange yet familiar world where they must accomplish their road of trials (see Campbell, 2004; Laing & Frost, 2014). During this phase, advice can usually be obtained from a benevolent helper. Due to the structure of the rooms, the road of trials usually leads up to a final ordeal where players become aware of being near their goal. The successful completion of the final large riddle will then unlock the door, lead payers to the object of their quest or their final decision. Once the road of trials is completed, whether successfully or not, the players face the provider again, often preceded by another transitioning phase. A typical play-through therefore can be identified as roughly mirroring Campbell's (2004) hero's journey. Over the course of this journey, ritualistic practices play a considerable role, most importantly calling for help, the initiation and the transition back out of the story.

Consequently, it can be said that no matter if the stories played were a time travel adventure or a detective fiction, the narrative's structure and rituals as those of the hero's journey shone through in every case. The monomyth as a super-structure can be identified as helping to guide people through the experience by means of a subconsciously familiar structure. This notion bears significance for studying experience co-creation, since as outlined by the theory chapter, the hero's journey does not start with initiation, just as an experience does not start in the "during" phase (Campbell, 2004; Prebensen et al., 2014b). Recognising that hedonic framing can utilise a larger discourse in building the narrative could provide a means of relieving the challenge posed by time limitations and help to get people connected to a story quickly, since it spreads opportunities for storytelling out into other phases of the experience (for example via websites). Regarding the research aim, a narrative that already starts before the experience could facilitate on-site processes of sense-making (see also Eco, 1989), inciting the process of enchantment at an earlier stage, as the thoughts on subcreation will show.

5.2.1 The Road of Trials

At the level of action, both provider and customer take on the roles of characters in the monomythical story, a relationship which is necessary in order to master the road of trials. The provider then is not only the storyteller, but in his function of guide and provider of aid, (s)he fulfils Campbell's (2004) archetype of magical helper or wise master (see also Riga, 2008):

"when people play directly, there my colleagues and me we are the hosts of the game so we help the players to get to the bits and pieces of the story. But there we are mainly - there our, our task is mainly to help people with the puzzles. We don't tell the story at all then"   *(P2)*

This was even echoed in players' terminology of the "game master"(G2). Observations also made it clear that fictional mediation can take place at different stages of the game. While in

one case, players were greeted by a host in character as part of the story-world, other providers greeted their guests in their role as provider. No matter whether providers appear homodiegetically or heterodiegetically, however, they always seem to have the same aim, which is to help and guide players through the experience in hopes of making it enjoyable. This reading of the provider as guide applies no matter if the character of the provider appears as a loveable "funny sidekick" (P1) or not, because players are always "in his control. Because they don't really know what's happening and he can tell them" (P1). This tension of power, however, is gradually being relinquished or shifted as players move through- and out of the providers' narratives to go on telling their own stories.

If the provider takes on the role of Vergil guiding the players through their road of trials, it follows that the players themselves take on the roles of the heroes, as already indicated by the website analysis. On site, this element also emerged in the framing and discourse of the examined narratives. Firstly, the observed providers took great care to make players feel individually valued, taking time for them and giving them the feeling that their contribution is not only appreciated, but absolutely crucial for the experience. Focus group interviews showed that when this valuation is not present, it quickly seems to translate into a forgettable experience, as players specifically complained about being rushed and the feeling that countless others had been there before them, in contrast to the experience at hand, where they had felt valued and welcomed: "I had the feeling like […] now we're here and we're important here and now and not anyone else who's coming after us or something (.) that was great" (G2). These roles and the appreciative interaction between them in order to master the trials and facilitate the game draw attention to autonomy in the process of experience co-creation. By framing themselves as benevolent guides and giving customers the role of heroes, providers were able to give players the feeling of being valued and in control, while in reality, they were dependent on the provider's advice and guidance.

5.2.2 Enchantment

Having reviewed the more structural elements of plot (monomyth) and characters (guide and hero), it is also important to pay attention to the processes of sense-making which take place at the level of action and are carried over into the aftermath of the experience. Set up by the structural elements, these processes can be identified as constituting the value of fantasy in the experiences at hand. Remembering Tolkien's view on the functions of fantasy, it comes to mind that the state of enchantment, a full acceptance of the secondary world, forms a kind of prerequisite for the fantastic to unfold its full impact. Providers clearly seemed to realise to

potential of this state, referring to it by the name of immersion or investment, and clearly outlining it as the desired effect of their stories:

> *"I think one of the big things that storytelling can do is leave (.) the graspable reality of our everyday lives behind and put us somewhere where we usually wouldn't be". / "what I would like to do when I play an escape room is I want to leave the real world by the time the door slams shut behind me. And not only in the room, but in the venue. And then I want to – I want to be told a story […]"* (P2)

> *"like when you heard a great story when you were a kid. Like when you read Harry Potter the first time and you were just completely invested into it, and had like dreams about who would I be and where would I go […] that's good storytelling, when you get someone to be that invested. And that sort of I think – that's where we want to go"* (P1)

Indeed, the observations and focus group interviews showed that players started to adjust rather rapidly to the story-world and accepted it as their temporal reality: "I am now in this story, I am in this world, and I will accept the experience for what it is" (Group 1). Among signs of this was the quick acceptance and adoption of the secondary world's terminology, as well as a reaction to fictional objects and characters as if they really existed or functioned. For example, one group "really sort of accepted that - Ok, so this [person] is actually a robot. And we'll go along with it"(G1), which resulted in their asking whether this unit sleeps or whether it had taste buds. Even later on in their focus group interview, the participants reverted back into the logic of the secondary world they had encountered during their game, correcting each other and discussing the use of terms:

> ➔ S1: *"And we were contacted."*
> ➔ S2: *"And we were contacted from (.) Mrs Sparkles?"*
> ➔ S3: *"Miss"*
> ➔ S2: *// "So the android (.)"*
> ➔ S3: *"I think that's an offensive term. They're B.O.B.s."*
> ➔ S4: *Mhm (affirmative)*
> ➔ S2: *"No, he said that robot would be offensive, android...!?"*

Additionally, groups started greeting recorded messages as if they represented actual people or characters, with players habitually responding "hello" every time a message began. Interestingly, in their immersed state, players also began to question the nature of their story, trying to figure out "what role am I playing really in this story?" (G1) and finding their own moral ground in relation to the information they were given. In one case, where the group's tasker was deliberately being framed as "big and scary" (P1), players quickly started to question "are we the good guys or the bad guys?" (G1). Even with no discernible steering by the frame players, when asked to make a moral decision, started to question the reliability and motives of their narrator, musing whether they were just being messed with. In yet another case, the group

actually ended up lying to the fictional character of their tasker, claiming that they had not fulfilled their mission because they had become too distrustful of his function in the secondary world. Thus, the carrying of a moral message or inciting the recipient to think about making moral decisions, as another hallmark of fantasy (e.g. Fabrizi, 2016), seems to be an amplifying factor which moves players beyond a mere game of make-believe or state of flow (see Bareis, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Furthermore, the enchanted state of a visitor to Faerie, according to Tolkien (1983), may also entail losing track of time, a sentiment echoed even in the framing of one of *The Alley's* adventures which is said to take place "outside time and space" (The Alley, 2018a). Curiously, despite the clear presence of the temporal element driving the narrative forwards, some participants still described the contrary effect of losing themselves:

> *"Well during that time you're just in that room with your team and that is what you're doing right now and (.) everything else you might be doing that day does not matter for the moment"* (G2)

> *"You don't know the time, you don't know where you are, what was around you before – you forget all of that. I think that's really great when something like that is (.) achieved with such an experience, with such an (.) event"* (G2)

As the second quote shows, even losing a sense of place was an effect of the experience. This was corroborated by fellow players, who stated that they temporarily forgot which city they were in until they emerged back from the venue. The state experienced during the game was even compared to a meditative mode of being as generated by a yoga lesson:

> *"I was completely in this story. And was concentrating on solving the next riddle or what you're doing, what we're doing together […] like during yoga, they always say – you don't think of anything, the thoughts that come just go by […] and also there in this room you're so focused on this story, on this room, in this – in another world"* (G2)

This level of immersion seemed especially to be the case whenever the room itself contained elements that served to tell the story and provide further immersion, as players described feeling a break in their experience once they noticed that riddles were only loosely connected to the story: "it was just number riddles basically, and then it was kind of like ah okay well then I'm out again". In contrast, players' narratives were much more strongly focused on- and structured around the actual riddles in the room – sometimes in astonishing detail – where these riddles were a tool for revealing further pieces of the story while otherwise, players said they "can't really remember all the riddles we solved in the room" (G1). Consequently, it seems important to provide clear causal relations in order to keep intact the story's meaning and potential for enchantment. However, the secondary worlds still seem to have been built up enough for the

group to think within them and fantasise about different approaches to them. For example, players were observed discussing whether they should have left a note to one of the fictional characters in order to try and influence the story, and even in the focus group situation continued developing alternative stories for the characters they had encountered.

From these findings, it could feasibly be concluded that enchantment, outside of time and space, inspiring people's own creativity and inviting their contributions, was for some time present in all of the observed groups while forming a clear component of the provider-as-storyteller's self-defined value proposal. With regard to the research aim, enchantment illustrates how framing experiences as fictional stories activates the customer's creativity, inviting them to enrich the secondary world with their own stories and thereby transforming the narrative into a transauthorial one with a unique meaning for each individual (Jenkins, 2007; Snel, 2013; Wolf, 2012). This notion of individual meaning, in turn, is relevant for experience provision, as it makes the process as unique as each player, while still taking place within a guidable super-structure. Moreover, enchantment may be seen as a precondition for liminality (see section 3.3), which in turn constitutes the future of experience provision (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). It seems, therefore, that the fantastic narrative frame may help customers to achieve this state in a much shorter time frame than anticipated (compare Arnould & Price, 1993; Picard, 2015).

5.2.3 Recovery

During their road of trials, players typically have to undergo a process of recovery (Tolkien, 1983) which is informed by exploration and sense-making practices upon a confrontation with the unknown. Thinking back to Todorov's (1973) understanding of the fantastic, mystery, uncertainty, and a confrontation with the unknown emerged as central themes. The website analysis reveals that these themes are already strongly foreshadowed in the online framing of experience offers.

The Alley seems to tell a story which is centered around mystery-detective and noir themes. This impression is communicated by the logo, which features a fingerprint and the outline of a person in a broad-brimmed hat and parka, outfitted with sunglasses and wearing the collar turned up. On the starting page, this image is additionally supplemented by a single, dim light reminiscent of a streetlamp, illuminating the logo in front of an otherwise black background. Black, red, and white generally make up much of the colour palette of the website in general, combined with an angular font somewhat reminiscent of the digital writing which characterised the early day of the internet (see image 5). All of these aspects combined serve to immediately communicate an air of mystery and secrecy to the viewer, drawing them into the atmosphere of

a detective fiction by means of a very familiar and immediately recognisable imagery. The somewhat minimalistic image for *The Ancient Mystery* shows a single stone table or altar in the middle of an otherwise dark space (see image 1). This picture seems to tease information rather than revealing it outright, once again upholding an air of mystery around the adventure. Darkness plays a prominent role here, implying the existence of unknown spaces which are waiting to be explored. One could say, therefore, that secrecy and mystery are the central themes which tie together the narrative frame of *The Alley*, as they can be found consistently throughout the website, irrespective of each room's individual theme. The analysis of other escape room websites further showed prominent use of this motif, often reflected by the choice of dark colour palettes (see appendix 2) or even the inclusion of mist in their artwork (see image 6). This framing seemingly invites the reader to venture forth and confront the unknown. Since the unknown is also strongly associated with death (see James & Mendlesohn, 2012; Tolkien, 1983), it is perhaps not surprising that horror themes are also well represented among the examined selection (e.g. BreakoutRoom.dk, 2017; Escape House Lund, 2018; Mystery Makers, 2018; Sevenloft, 2018). Moreover, the interviews with the providers made it clear that the framing of mystery can be extended beyond the web presentation, as a "market strategy" (P1).

This structural framing of mystery then translated into active processes of exploration and sense-making at the level of action. Observations brought this point to light as in one case, darkness was constantly used to create a certain atmosphere which players described as a "basic mood of suspense" (G2). Within the rooms, it quickly became clear that magic may lurk behind every mundane object, and that things needed to be treated outside of their everyday context. Gradually, via an almost alchemical process of transformation, objects revealed their true meaning and significance when put into a certain light, environment, or position, which usually led to euphoric reactions of the players (e.g. whooping, clapping). The recovery of a child-like view was actively addressed by some providers. For P1, seeing people go through their rooms is "[…] so very human. Like looking at people doing it - they're like - it's just kids playing". When looking at *The Gatsby Maze's* front page, this message is transported by some rather striking imagery which, arguably, could be seen as taking the trope even further towards a message of transformation. The first slogan which greets any visitor to the website proclaims "Immersive experiences about humanity" in yellow-golden letters (The Gatsby Maze, 2018b) and is accompanied by a rather dark background image depicting the close-up of an almost androgynous human being visible to just below the neck (see image 2). There is no visible clothing nor any accessories in the picture. Additionally, the person seems to be standing in a downpour of water, with the drops being rendered almost golden by reflecting the light from

below. This image, read together with the text, may be seen as suggesting the deconstruction of people to their core human form. As the closed eyes and naked skin in the picture suggest, this might even be a rather vulnerable state. In fact, one could go so far as seeing the image as the depiction of a rebirth, as the water can be seen as a cleansing element that washes away all superficial aspects, leaving just the human being at the core, seemingly reborn blind and naked and vulnerable as a child. This image alludes to the kinds of things which may happen in an escape room: many of the day-to-day rules people organise their life by in the real world suddenly do not apply anymore, forcing them to explore the new context and to make new sense of it. This process of having to see things in a new way, having to discover the logic of the world anew, mirrors the concept of recovery. Once again, this message was strongly corroborated by both observations and the participants' own narratives. In exploring the rooms, people seemed to quickly revert to their haptic senses, running their hands over things, picking things up, and touching them all over to because they were "suspecting a secret, or something hidden" (G2).

The process of recovery, according to P1, often involves challenging people's expectations: "we tried to actually give you rewards for being curious and […] being kind of the (.) the childish self. So if you for instance ah open an [object] that you […] you don't know if you're allowed to open […], you will find a key". Indeed, processes of sense-making among players often involved having to gradually break away from the social rules and norms they had learned to accept as natural all their lives. Clues often turned out to be hidden in places which would normally be regarded as personal space, and which in the real world, people might have qualms about rummaging through. Concurrently, questions about permission and ethics greatly informed the dialogue of both groups when reminiscing of their experiences. Another rather obvious factor regarding exploration and the challenging of norms and expectations was that people with more experience playing escape rooms seemed much less hesitant to slip out of the rules of the real world. When comparing the current experience with previous ones, players made statements like:

"[…] in the first escape room we did, [the provider] was like "ah, don't - like if something's on the wall, don't wriggle it too much" so we were all super careful until we discovered that behind one thing we would have actually found hidden chocolate (laughs) and we didn't, so I think now we just went in and were like waaaah" (G1)

"And later on I thought if we – when we do this the next time […] we would approach the third room we'd be playing completely differently" (G2)

Accordingly, some players went about quite cautiously, making sure that things were put back in their place and trying not to disturb things too much, while others entered the room like a

whirlwind, surprising even the provider by how brusquely they went about their exploration. Therefore, exploration and recovery also seem to be an acquired skill, which was evident in both focus groups as players, in constructing their narratives, frequently reverted to comparisons with previous rooms they had played, making sense of their experience as one in a progression of similar experiences and comparing and contrasting their behaviour across this conglomeration.

Thus, the confrontation with a world which operates on some kind of logic, but not the one people are used to, necessitates the recovery of a fresh, child-like view. Set up through online framing, there is a certain tension between exploration and expectation, which ultimately leads to new processes of sense-making: testing out the rules and the frame of the narrative and thereby prompting recovery. The application of fantastic elements like recovery and enchantment, therefore, contributes to an understanding of how experience value is generated. The recovery of a child-like view and the immersion into a different reality can both be identified as deeply human desires or yearnings which go beyond mere need-fulfilment (Belk et al., 2003; Kramer, 2017; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013; Tolkien, 1983). Remembering Turner's (1979) description of liminality as a time of enchantment, it also becomes clear how the experience at hand lays the foundations for liminality by transporting people into a new context with new circumstances that need to be explored to be understood (Beech, 2011; Elliott, 2011). The finalisation of this process may be seen as taking place after the experience, when people are given time to reflect and re-tell their stories. Thus, while the story told by the room is terminated by a clear time-limit, the narrative continues, which was clearly evidenced by people's need to talk and re-tell their experience (see also Nicholson, 2016).

5.3 After: Masters of Two Worlds

In the aftermath of the experience, which parallels Campbell's (2004) return of the hero, narrative meaning is reflected upon and re-constructed on a non-fictional level (see Czarniawska, 2004), as players move on from being characters and co-creators to being narrators in their own right. In this regard, the concepts of escape and consolation, which are closely entwined with recovery and enchantment, can provide insights into the dialogue surrounding experience co-creation as they show how a compelling experience narrative can lead people to engage in reflexive thought processes, which anchor the experience in their memory (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen et al., 2014b; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016).

As mentioned, the term "escape" in the context of framing the experience offers at hand can be seen as attaining dual meaning, referring to the Tolkienian sense of the word as well as to the

goal of the game. As participants' reactions and providers' aims suggest, this dual relationship between the fantastic and the real world could be seen as carrying special value, making participants of a successful experience (and not necessarily a successful game) masters of two worlds (Campbell, 2004). In fact, the opportunity to escape their real lives for a little while was frequently mentioned by focus group participants as one of the things they took away from the experience. For some, it was an interesting way of discovering new spaces in a well-known city:

"also the building, like and they had a [sign] on it and then you enter and then it's something completely new, a new world in it, even though I've been in Malmö so many times so like - and in Helsingborg […] you go to the same places all the time and when you do something like this (.) you're in like another atmosphere, another world really" *(G1)*

For others, however, the experience literally provided an opportunity to get away from all thoughts, plans, or worries for a while: "[…] you're so out of it, of your life and your worries or hardships or whatever kind of problems you're having you know, or any other thoughts (.) just like in this escape room" (G2). This process of escaping the real world into one which was equally unknown to each player also seemed to bring with it a reflexive process, triggered by the behaviour this new world required. Interviewees in both cases had lengthy discussions about their own roles in the game, reflecting on their self-perception and comparing and contrasting it with the recently experienced. As one participant put it: "I wouldn't say it brings out the 'true nature in people' but like - I think it (.) surely brings out how you talk to your teammates, how you collaborate, and […] under the last minutes like how you react under stress" (G1). Discussions revolved around who saw themselves as an "enabler" (G1), who was perceived as "the quiet, logical type" (G2), and who was perceived as "the character pressing ahead" (G2). While some "really enjoyed (.) getting to be myself in the story" (G1), other players took on roles which were described as unusual and even a little uncomfortable: "maybe that's why I was a little more nervous than usual, because I normally don't do that, the thing with directing. I leave that [to others]" (G2). Therefore, P2's description of his escape room as a "sandbox mode", where one can try things out without real consequences, seems especially pertinent as the fictional circumstances led players to reflect on- and make sense of their image of self and others, as well as enabling- or perhaps even forcing players to try themselves out in a new role. As P1 rightly points out: "even if it is a situation in which we wouldn't be, it still has connections to the real world somehow." Another space opened up by this dichotomy seems to have been a room for creativity and higher interpersonal valuation. Players addressed the fact that in the

context of this new world which is understood by no one, "everyone has a clean slate" (G1), which is why each person's opinions and ideas are considered equally:

> *"Like no matter what - because not once did anyone ever be like 'that's a silly idea' or 'that won't work' no, it's like you have an idea, you say it, and it'll never be dumb. We'll try everything because we're all on the same field"*   *(G1)*

A discussion of the possibilities such an attitude might have for the real world was even incited. In close connection with recovery, therefore, Tolkienian escape can be identified as providing people with the opportunity to reflect on both themselves and their social context. Thus, fiction truly seems to have enabled an active experience within life through its escapist function (see Phelan, 2017).

Finally consolation, according to Tolkien (1983), is centrally concerned with a story's ending. While in the two focus groups, players did not manage to finish their game, the following interviews showed that curiously, this does not even seem to be the precondition for a happy ending to the overall experience. First of all, one rare case needs to be mentioned in which all the musical build-up and all of the time pressure finally led up to an escape in the literal last seconds, when half of the group seemed to have already given up. Such moments can perhaps be identified as eucatastrophic, since this particular instance resulted in extreme euphoria – it needs to be said, however, that due to the difficulty of escape rooms, such moments are certainly not guaranteed for every group (see also Liu et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the rooms seem to at least bear the potential for such an ending. With a story for players to slip into, the dynamic seems to change a little – especially if the goal is no longer breaking out of an enclosed space. P1 points out:

> *"that's what I thought at first, that people will feel so much better when they solved it, but that can't even be said with the experience we have here […] people really seem to cherish what we did here with the story, and that you – that they are engulfed in something […] having played this and being part of this […] this experience seems to win. And (..) solving it is then kind of an added benefit, but it's not the necessarily most important part"*

In the focus groups, this view was largely corroborated due to the differing experiences the two teams – neither of whom accomplished their mission – had with the endings of their stories. One group felt that they were left hanging and unsatisfied, since no story-driven ending was provided for them:

> *"you still get that feeling especially when you don't know any outcome when it's so story-driven […] it would have made me feel better to - you know, even if whatever happened would have been shitty, I would have had closure."*   *(G1)*

On the other hand, players in another group were given an ending to the story, and even got to make their final decision, which seemed to result in a wholly positive view of the ending of their experience:

> *"It was a conclusion, he let us have the conclusion, otherwise we would all have come out like how did it go now? What could have been? How could it have been? Where was this now? No, and he just gave us a little hint […] And then he left the decision to us and **we** ended the story."* (G2)

These different accounts of essentially the same scenario seem to suggest that in a narrated experience, happy- versus catastrophic endings seem to hinge more on the framing of the experience. Important aspects seem to be whether players gets to feel individually valued and in control of their story and meeting expectations by finishing the story people have embarked upon and perhaps gotten invested in, leaving them with closure and a fully realised experience from beginning to end. In this way, customers truly get "to go home with something that [they] didn't come with" (P2) since, of course, the fictional boon cannot be kept. But when the fictional experience makes people think and reflect on real life, the relationship between fantasy and reality perhaps makes them, in some small way, masters of both worlds.

5.3.1 Subcreation

Finally, while the incipient stages of subcreation seem to be present in many escape rooms due to the nature of their gameplay which necessitates people to treat the presented reality as other, it is the case of *The Gatsby Maze* in particular which shows active attempts to build up an entire coherent story-world as the backdrop for their service experience. Here, the providers seem to have taken care, even on their website, to never break character and stay thematically within the fictional world of M.A.Z.E. Corp.

On the site, this message is chiefly transported by the texts and the audio-visual material, which both feel as though they could be actual recruitment material due to their presentation of who the company is, followed by a vision and mission statement, which then leads over into a recruitment pitch. Even technical details concerned with the booking process are worked into the fiction. For example, the description text answers the question of how many people can play the room at the same time with "Moment Alterers travel in groups of 3 or 4" (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a). Even the design of the escape room website, with its sober, light colour palette and its geometrical designs forms a stark contrast to the darker and more extravagant design of the black and gold welcome page, signalling that the user is transitioning into the world of M.A.Z.E. Corp just by switching pages (see images 2 and 3, appendix 1). In the video, the office-like space surrounding the speaker seems vaguely futuristic due to the use of blue LED lighting.

However, the space is still identifiable as an office, with screens and cubicles visible in the background (see image 4). The intercut imagery and the soundtrack are rather cinematic, but a certain measure of recognisable elements give the pitch a believability that allows the audience to move beyond a willing suspension of disbelief and provides an entry into the fiction. Moreover, wording choices such as "we are expanding our crew of Moment Alterers" in the video (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a 01:14) and "[become] a secret agent in one of M.A.Z.E. Corporation's missions" in the description text (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a) suggest a wider context beyond the immediate mission the reader is being recruited for. In short, it gives exactly the impression described by Wolf (2012) of getting only a glimpse of a much larger secondary world, the entirety of which may never be fully grasped. The importance of this is also distinctly stressed by P1 when talking about their work:

"it's very important for us to have the story completely straight. Like we have a huge backstory about this. We know the corporation […] we know the minister […] we know his secretary, we have this whole story about her. Who is she, and who is he, and where were these B.O.B units created? […] We have every detail of this. We could answer any question, but we don't give you all this information […] for an audience experience, it's more about them filling the gaps for themselves"

Accordingly, all technical information, e.g. the introductory talk and time limit, is made part of the performance. Having a recognisable pop-culture theme was regarded as important because "it's easier to step into a world once you know the theme" (P1). While P1 seemed quite conscious of the fact that they had created a "world" or "universe", P2 also stressed the importance of attention to detail and a coherent fiction:

"we are fairly obsessed with details. That's what makes our work a bit (.) harder but then also creates an experience […] we do pay attention to details and to - let's just say interesting levels (laughs) (..) and yes, it does have storytelling. Because when you are immersed in a situation, when you are really in an immersive way of storytelling as an escape room is or can be, you don't want to get ripped out of that. You trip over one tiny detail and you're out of it. That's like - it's in a magic trick […] when you see the part in a magic trick where somebody is cheating, even if it's just a tiny little bit, so like really where the trick is happening, and then the whole thing loses its magic […] (laughs) and this is why we pay attention to those details"

In the frame of this small study, these approaches certainly showed an impact with players, who frequently used terminology referring to other worlds when talking about their experiences. Notably, the group playing the *Gatsby Maze's* offer even focused on the fact that storytelling seemed to transcend the borders of what they thought would be the experience, saying that they felt as though it "started before it started" (G1).

With regard to understanding experience co-creation, approaches of subcreation can be identified as quite beneficial for providers of hedonic offers and have in fact already proved successful in theme park experiences and videogames (see Ecenbarger, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Wolf, 2012). A masterfully conceived secondary world usually makes people want to return to it and experience more and more stories with in it. More so, it even encourages and inspires people to actively contribute to the stories within a particular world (Jenkins, 2007; Wolf, 2012). An experience narrative that overarches different levels of communication and ties together all events into a causal relationship which tells a coherent story, therefore, could aid in subcreating a world which can be entered before the actual experience even begins, inhabited by both provider and customer as "partners in making and delight" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 143), and which remains memorable long afterwards, capturing people's imaginations and informing their re-framings of their own world. *The Gatsby Maze's* subcreative approach, therefore, represents a most interesting, unique, and promising example of integrating a subcreated world into an experience narrative in order to gain differentiation and capture the player's imagination.

5.4 The Experience Narrative

From these emplotted findings, it becomes clear that a narrative view applied across all experience stages makes it possible to conceptualise service experiences as a whole as narration, as suggested by Corvellec (2015). In the case at hand, there is an overall structure, character roles, and especially values and effects which seem to converge across different individual themes and different styles of narration. The introduction named narratives in the experience economy as a means for providers to frame- and for customers to make sense of an offer. The findings presented here indicate that these two aspects are closely interwoven, with providers using classical narrative structure (intentionally or not) to frame their offers and enable customers to observe, understand, and enact the narrative (Corvellec, 2006). Once customers enter the level of action, however, processes of sense-making characterise the way in which narrative meaning is co-constructed, with providers framing and customers exploring the secondary reality and its rules. Through this process, a very unique sort of value can be generated. Firstly, through the ability to create enchantment, the narratives at hand bear a potential to create liminal experiences where any form of (self)discovery may happen. Equally, recovery and escape enable a distancing from reality which can initiate processes of self-discovery and generate imagined wonder. The fact that people are at all times aware of the fictional nature of the offer they are consuming does not seem to take away from their state of

enchantment. In fact, the constant presence of the dichotomy between fantasy and reality, embedded in a story rich in ritual and imbued with the structure of one of the oldest and most popular stories of mankind (Campbell, 2004) seems to allow for the creation of more deeply human experiences. Where the story-world of such experiences is masterfully crafted and provided with a cohesive beginning and end, people can be themselves within a story, providing them with a chance to escape the mundane (Cohen & Taylor, 1976; Tolkien, 1983) and recover a different view of mundane objects, themselves, their team members, and perhaps even wider moral topics. Thus, the value of fantasy is added to the purely playful scenario of mingled pleasure and pain (Kolar, 2017; Liu et al., 2018), addressing people on a deeper level not of needs, but of desires (Belk et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kramer, 2017). The fantastic allows people to add their own meaning and consequently, their own stories to a narrative which inspires their own creativity, thereby creating an offer which is perhaps unparalleled in its customisability. In this context, a well-crafted story which provides a "happy ending" irrespective of the final score of the game even seems to provide a means of recovery, making the experience memorable and positive.

Since a narrative theory of services remains as yet unformed (Corvellec, 2015), and yet the experiences examined here showed such overarching themes that they enable a reading and re-emplotment based on the functions and values of fantasy, one could begin by mapping out experience stages in relation to the model of narrative communication. In the present case, it could be said that customers move between different layers and roles in this model, progressing from being a reader at an earlier point in time to the status of characters within a fictional story. Eventually, guests themselves can turn into narrators when re-telling their experience to others. Providers similarly have the opportunity of inhabiting the story they create as characters, although the choice remains theirs to make. The experience providers' core role may be identified as that of the author, packaging a nonfictional message (however simple it may be) into a compelling fictional story for guests to inhabit and use creatively, whereby experience value is co-created. Overall, hedonic framing across the experience process seems to operate on a tension between structuralism and sense-making in a time-frame during which narrative power is gradually relinquished. In an attempt at visualising this process, the graphic representation below integrates the levels of narrative communication with the experience phases, taking into consideration the notions of sense-making and exploration expressed by Czarniawska (2004) and Cassinger (2010). Thus, one arrives at what may be called the overall experience narrative, which accepts customer autonomy and the customer's role as co-narrator while acknowledging that providers (and, in larger operations, staff) have to take on flexiblet

roles across the process of experience co-creation, constantly framing and re-framing their customers' creative input while giving them the feeling of being in control and being individually valued (see fig. 4).

Thinking back to Eco's (1979) notions of different possible worlds produced by a text, the world of the reader's expectations ties in with the idea of creatively and autonomously using what an author provides. Eco (1989) proposes that the so-called openness of a work is a tangible, theorisable element. Any work of art could essentially be seen as an unfinished one, merely offering meaning and simultaneously providing the interpreting party with the tools to complete it (Eco, 1989). Open texts may thus be seen as guiding their implied readers subtly through means of strategy and structure, leaving a considerable part of meaning creation up to them (see Eco, 1979, 1981). Considering the interplay of structure and sense-making in the examined scenarios, it may therefore be possible to perceive escape rooms as such open works, where the recipient is guided by structural elements, but overall plays a vital part in constructing the narrative's final meaning. This concept may, in fact, even be extended to service experiences in general, since it strongly overlaps with notions of enhanced customer autonomy in the experience economy (see Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Snel, 2013).
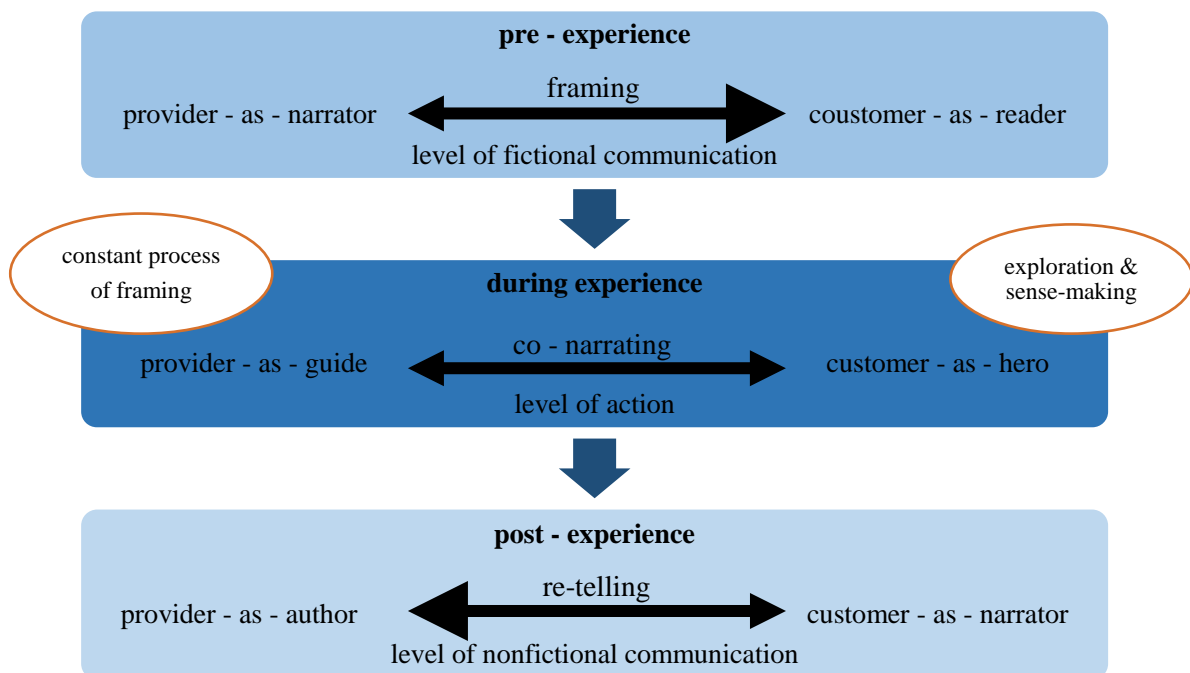

Figure 4:
The experience narrative. Constructed with reference to Meyer (2011), Jahn (2017), Prebensen et al. (2014b), Czarniawska (2004), Cassinger (2010).

6. Discussion

Emerging from the realm of analysis, it is now time to critically discuss the final study in a wider academic- and social context. Firstly, regarding the research aim this study was able to generate a theory- and evidence-based conceptualisation of the experience co-creation process based on a narrative point of view. In the context of previous research, this model is able to include experience characteristics like the shift of autonomy (e.g. Boswijk, 2013) and indicates that viewing experiences as narratives would imply their appreciation as open works of art. With regard to the initial research gaps identified by the literature review, customers, in this view, are acknowledged as having a central role in the co-creation of meaning (Eco, 1989; see also Livingstone & Das, 2009). In answer to Prebensen et al. (2014a), this furthers an understanding of their role as resource integrators, mediators, and moderators within experience co-creation. Even with regard to the impact of art, the role of individual experience has been underestimated, with researchers calling for the exploration of different methodologies in this context (White & Hede, 2008), an aspect this thesis is hoping to provide. While all people, of course, have different motivations for engaging in an experience (Nicholson, 2016), it should be noted that if the artwork and story exist, they may be picked up as a value-adding element by those who are open to it. Regarding the research gap on framing processes, the narrative frame makes experiences uniquely customisable, giving providers a solid baseline for consistency without risking commoditisation – which is said to be highly detrimental to experience offers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Contemplations of whether hedonic framing could be used for service recovery (Liu et al., 2018) are also illuminated by this narrative view, which indicates that as long as a consistent story with a clear ending is provided, customers seem to perceive the experience as a positive one. The literature review further showed that many approaches towards conceptualising experiences do not attempt this in a holistic way, neglecting either the temporal aspect or the roles of both producer and consumer. Kolar (2017) has already demonstrated escape rooms to challenge existing experience frameworks. Putting forth a rather detailed model of playful experiences, he nevertheless neglects experiential stages, focusing solely on virtual communication. Although the concept presented here is much less detailed and puts considerable responsibility onto the provider, a well-crafted narrative is nevertheless believed to be a powerful tool for successfully facilitating service experience co-creation. Demonstrating the benefits of a narrative mode of knowing, this approach further draws attention to the value that interdisciplinary streams from literature, theatre, media, and the arts could bring to research fields dominated by paradigmatic approaches, which seem unable to capture the magic in service experiences. The approach

herein is certainly far from optimal (see 4.5 Limitations), generating a broad variety of data which had to be grappled with. However, merging narrative communication and meaning creation (through the interplay of structure and sense-making) with experience phases might at least be a first step towards a narrative approach to services (Corvellec, 2015).

In a wider social context, the consumption of service experiences is certainly gaining ground, even contesting classical attractions in urban settings (Boswijk, 2013 ; Kolar, 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). The research at hand shows that the fantastic seems to enable deeply human –even liminal – experiences in a relatively short time frame. Given that experience consumers are generally aware of the fictionality of the offers they indulge in (Kolar, 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 2013) and hungry for collecting interesting life stories (Liu et al., 2018), it bears considering whether catering to human fantasies and desires and providing people with a chance to escape their reality for a while may not become a prominent paradigm in the economy of experiences –after all, what else an arctic expedition or a nature adventure (Arnould & Price, 1993; Picard, 2015)? Fantastic, storied experiences however may be created anywhere and at considerably lower exertion for both people and environment. Ever enabled by advancing technology, the return of experiences to their oldest medium could therefore even prove a more sustainable form of entertainment. While both escape rooms and the experience economy in general represent phenomena born of affluent societies (Nicholson, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013) which clearly excludes certain groups of people from the dialogue, popular narratives may also be read as models of the world (*Content, Audiences and Production*, 2001), which is why the immense demand for a phenomenon that seems to tell a fantastic narrative could also be seen as a reflection of societal yearnings. Service studies, therefore, could benefit considerably from paying close attention to narratives at a time which seems to be witnessing the next paradigmatic shift from service- to experience thinking (Boswijk et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). This societal shift might well necessitate a corresponding academic shift from paradigmatic- to narrative thinking and knowing.

7. Conclusion and Coda

In the end, it is perhaps best to think of this conclusion as something akin to a musical coda, the final note in this story which attempts to present a contemplative evaluation of what the things discussed herein might mean in the context of the research phenomenon (see Bruner, 2002; Kim, 2016). Therefore, while some tentative answers to the initial research questions will be posited, it should be borne in mind that these are no definite explanations, but rather

implications arising from the reading at hand. As such, this coda intends to invite readers to enter into a productive dialogue about the research issues discussed here.

With regard to the initial research question, this dialogue includes the notion that, as shown in the analysis, narrative theory can lead to an understanding of hedonic experiences as open works of art which are created by a provider, but completed and ultimately filled with meaning by a recipient. A fantastic reading reveals that when the narrative framing of such experiences invites participants into a subcreated world they can discover and enrich with their own narratives, any number of creative synergies may occur, making the experience uniquely customisable. Viewing experience provision as an enacted narrative across all experience stages also implies the presence of an overarching structural theme, almost a metanarrative, that spans and encompasses the individual stories of offers and activates providers and customers across all levels of narrative communication. Here, the fantastic emerges as the metanarrative which characterises the escape room experiences at hand, suggesting that this view might be fruitful in further forms of hedonic experience offers which aim to address consumer desires by combining pleasure and pain (see Belk et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Liu et al., 2018). Viewing the co-creation of hedonic experiences through the lens of fantasy literature draws attention to the importance of seeing experiences as an overall narrative, a journey which goes beyond the mere act of consumption and transcends the borders of personal, everyday life. Concurrently, reading experience stages as an allegory of the hero's journey makes it clear that the experience narrative needs to be cohesive across all of these stages in order to create a memorable and enchanting outcome. Discourse and story, therefore, should interlock in a tight fit, allowing customers to be themselves within the narrative frame. Furthermore, the current discussion about the future of the experience economy (see Pine & Gilmore, 2013) predicts that experiences which provide a transformative aspect will become ever more relevant. In this respect, fantastic narratives provide the ideal basis and platform for co-creating liminal experiences in a short-term context, as they present a dichotomy between fantasy and reality which allows people to explore questions of identity and morality by way of sense-making in the context of a new world. Thinking back to the initial problematisation and research background, another characteristic of experience co-creation addressed by a fantastic reading is the growing autonomy of the customer, and the demand for more individualised and customised experience offers, which still seem to be regarded as daunting (Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen et al., 2014a; Snel, 2013). However, understanding customers as co-narrators and heroes of a fantastic narrative also entails a re-evaluation of the provider's role as that of a benevolent guide within their own artwork, gently framing and invisibly structuring

the experience into a cohesive whole. This might ultimately aid in preventing customer uncertainty (as mentioned by Liu et al., 2018) and frustrating experiences, even if the set task is not accomplished successfully. Furthermore, understanding customers as co-narrators also entails an acceptance of the shift of narrative power, as they will move on to tell their own stories by various means. The findings presented here indicate that even simple narrative framing such as providing a cohesive end to the story-arc has the potential to prevent frustrating experiences and inspire positive re-tellings.

With regard to the second research question, it quickly became clear that fantastic elements like the recovery of a new view, the confrontation of the unknown, and the escape into a different reality formed frequent themes within the experience dialogue across all levels and sides of narrative communication, irrespective of the individual playable story-contents. The emergence of these elements led to a more profound understanding of how deeply human experiences are co-created: due to the powerful dichotomy between fantasy and reality, strengthened and transported through rituals, fantastic narratives enable providers to address and satisfy human desires and yearnings which are utterly immaterial and may seem nearly unattainable (Belk et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kramer, 2017), thereby enchanting their customers.

A discussion of the second research question directly leads into the final and third one, since the feat of achieving enchantment seems to entail a rather special sort of value in connection with customer's needs and desires. In an experience economy, these desires have become more abstract and impalpable and can be directed at more than mere objects (Belk et al., 2003; Boswijk, 2013 ; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen et al., 2014a). The reading presented here implies that fantastic narratives provide one way of addressing such desires, utilising one of humanity's oldest means of experiencing in anew context in order to connect to people on an emotional level. To sum it up in the words of Terry Pratchett, humans need fantasy to be human (*Hogfather,* 1996). Across the different stages of the experience co-creation process, then, the value of fantasy can be described thus: prior to the experience, the framing of a fantastic experience narrative may be used to provide a call to adventure and by presenting people with a glimpse of a fascinating world they might want to find out more about, drawing them out of reluctance and into action. During the experience, people are literally given the opportunity to escape into a familiar yet new world, where the recovery of a child-like view is almost necessary in order to move forward, creating a space where everyone is equal and eradicating all outer aspects, leaving just the human being, at their core. Finally, after the experience, having been transported into a story may lead people to reflect on-and discuss about

themselves, the decisions they made – or would have made – and their own immersion. This process of reflection, it seems, is able to generate its own value by creating personal insights, self-framings, or simply moments of hilarity – especially when a clear and cohesive ending is present. Thus, the value of fantasy for the experience economy is that it addresses people on an emotional level, allows them space to reflect and escape reality for a while, creates a space where everyone is equal and can try out their strengths and different roles, helps providers to create immersion and engagement in a relatively short amount of time, and inspires creative retellings.

All in all therefore, the ambiguous relationship between fantasy, reality, and desire can provide a channel for understanding and more adequately addressing the co-creation of hedonic experiences which operate on a deeply human level. In an experience economy, providers could strive to address human desires rather than just higher-order needs, treating experience provision akin to a form of art and understanding the customer as a heroic figure, who can be advised and guided, but who should also feel in control of their own story and thus individually valued. Overall, this thesis contributes to experience research by opening up a dialogue about experiences as fantastic narratives, a viewpoint which may aid in the creation of more human and customised experiences. It also contributes to the field of narrative research by perceiving narratives, as indicated by Corvellec (2015), as something more than a methodological tool. Rather, they are understood as an overarching concept which, by means of a story and discourse that craft causal relationships across a temporally bound encounter, is able to present customers with a world to enter, explore, escape to, and reflect on, blurring for a brief moment the boundaries and re-instilling magic into the mundane.

7.1 Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the conducted work, some suggestions for further research emerge. First, this study emphasises the fact that theatre, literature, and gaming are gaining new worth in an experience economy context (Bisnow, 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). It is therefore hoped that further research might include more approaches governed by narrative- instead of logico-scientific thinking when trying to elucidate spontaneous experience framing and co-creation. In doing so, the tentative concept put forth here would have to be developed further and adapted to different service experience cases. As evidenced by the popularity of the escape room phenomenon (see Kolar, 2017; Nicholson, 2016), the context of society and industry is ever-evolving, which is why today, it no longer necessarily requires a week-long physical adventure in order to transport people into a story and enchant them with an experience narrative. Acknowledging this

development would mean including smaller, short-term events (e.g. a medieval Christmas market) as research foci and awarding them with the notion of narrative power. Just as the socio-cultural context keeps evolving, so do the means of storytelling, as shown by the *Gatsby Maze's* inclusion of VR technology (see also Fink, 2017). Therefore, the role of technology in experiential framing and storytelling – especially its potential use for challenging and breaking expectations – might represent yet another intriguing research issue. Furthermore, in order to remedy the exclusive cultural focus of this thesis (see 4.5 Limitations), cross-cultural studies of narrated hedonic experiences could inspire additional, more varied readings and their potential implications. Finally, and perhaps most intriguingly, this research has already shown that while a story may have ended, narration goes on at different levels of communication (see also Kolar, 2017). Memorable narratives often do not end with one retelling, nor do they inspire only oral retellings. Hence, an aspect not considered by this thesis but highly relevant when it comes to customers-as-storytellers and their role in value co-creation is the pervasiveness of online narratives, which opens up compelling questions about the power of voices (e.g. social influencers) and the reliability of narrators. As such, online user-to-user narratives could perhaps be seen as fictions which extend the experience narrative even further (both before- and after the experience) and their framing certainly represents the most fascinating topic for further research.

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9. Appendix

a. Appendix 1: Images
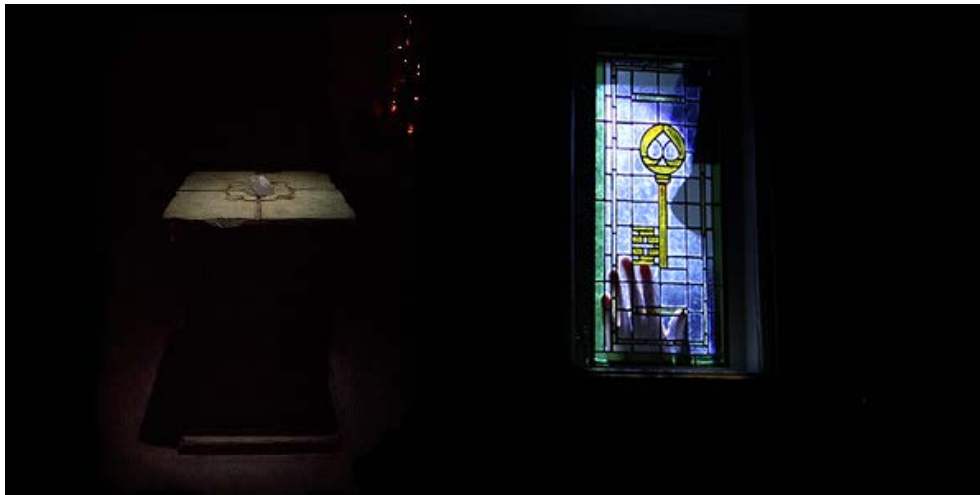
Image 1:
The Alley – pictures for *The Ancient Mystery* (L) and *The Last Hand* (R) (The Alley, 2018a)

Image 2:
The Gatsby Maze – welcome page (The Gatsby Maze, 2018b).

Image 3:
The Gatsby Maze – escape room page banner (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a).

Image 4:
The Gatsby Maze – video trailer screenshot (The Gatsby Maze, 2018a).

Image 5:
The Alley – main page and logo (The Alley, 2018a).

Image 6:
Sherlocked – welcome page (Sherlocked ESTD 2014, 2018)

b. Appendix 2: Website Overview

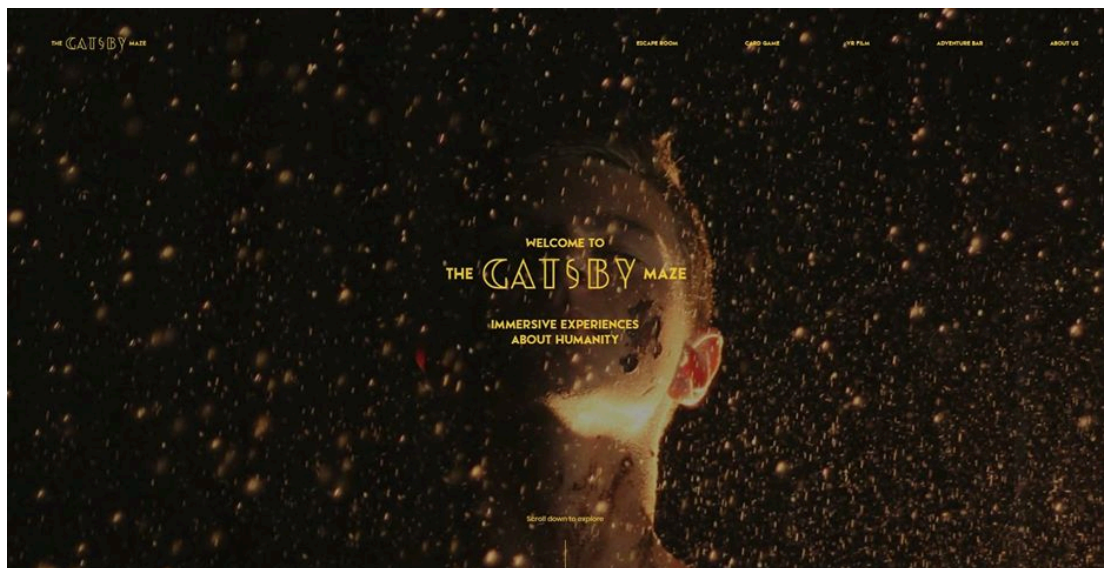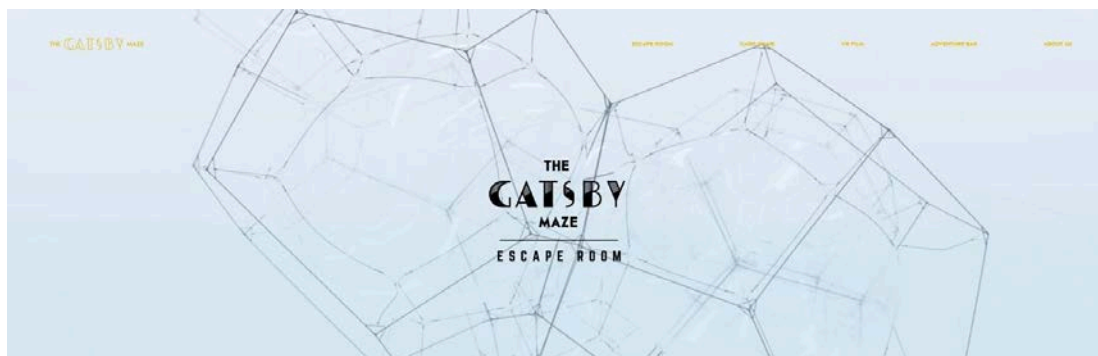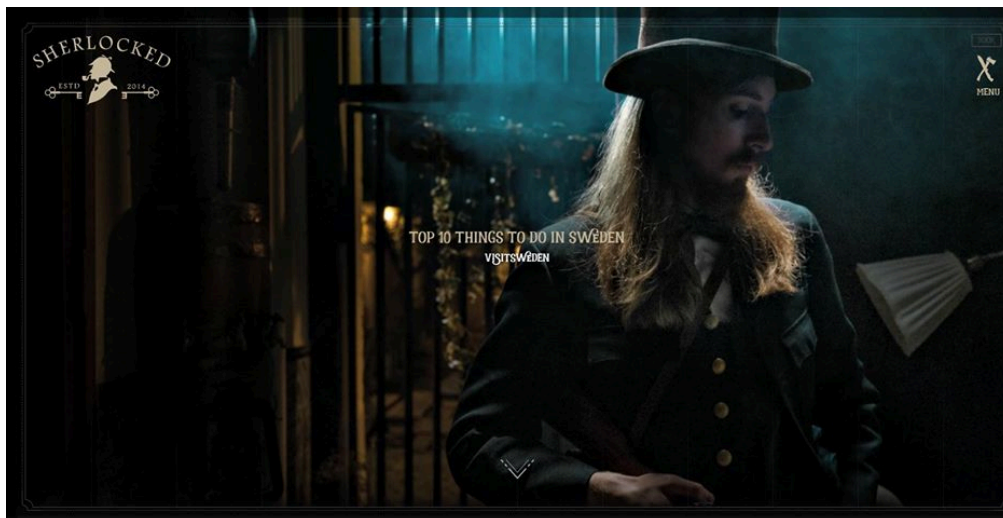| Brain Game (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"you are the hero of a special story" / "find and arrest the most dangerous criminal of the time"
The Boon	✓	"resist the seven deadly sins and obtain salvation"
Adventure	✗	
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"Solve the mystery associated to the tape"
Exploration	✓	"get face to face with your own weaknesses and passions"
Immersion & Desires	✓	"Rooms with fascinating scenarios that take you to another place"/ "The story gets together with reality. Imagination meets plausibility […]"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✓	The Ring; "solve the mystery […], or else Samara Morgan will hunt you. Do you have the nerve and the courage to discover what has happened […]?"
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black, grey, dark red

Breakout Room (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"can you deactivate the bombs and save the world?" / "be the next hero of the world"
The Boon	✗	
Adventure	✗	
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"you are locked in a room filled with puzzles, codes & mysteries"
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"let the nostalgia run wild"
Video Material Included	✓	short video for each room
Features a Horror Game	✓	Black Magic; "Caught in the spirit world of black magic you must try to find a way out of the universe of Black Magic."
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black, grey

Breakout Sweden (SWE)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	having to prevent the outbreak of a world war
The Boon	✓	Background image of a human figure walking out of huge doors from a dark space into the light / "all that separates you from freedom"
Adventure	✗	
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	Labyrinth-shaped logo
Exploration	✓	"Find out what is really going on"
Immersion & Desires	✓	"no connection to the outside world"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black, dark red

ClockedIn (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"[…] it is now up to you"
The Boon	✓	"find the 5 mythical Rune stones which will give the owner true wisdom [and] eternal life"
Adventure	✓	"At Clockedin you can find adventures in 3 different Escape Game Rooms" / "If you are ready for a good adventure, book now"
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"think out of the box to solve the mystery"/ "Mysteries & riddles in a room"
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"At school you need focus. Outside school you crave euphoria. This game will bring both to the table."
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✓	The Cocktail Party of Vlad D. Hanson, "make a run for your life in a fun […]way"
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	grey, brown / sepia

Escape Copenhagen (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	having to save Copenhagen from destruction
The Boon	✓	search for magic crystals / "find as many millions as possible"
Adventure	✗	
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"not all is as it seems"
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"the opportunity to fly and control everything with your hand and head movement"
Video Material Included	✓	general explanation about escape rooms
Features a Horror Game	✓	The Psychotic Janitor; " You and your team are now captured in a basement design as a trap by the psychotic old janitor that once maintained the building."
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	brown, grey

Escape House Lund (SWE)[2]		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"Go in […] for the challenge of your life" / "[…] if you dare to accept the challenge"
The Boon	✓	"Breathtaking pursuit of freedom" / "the desirable relict" / "break out to freedom"
Adventure	✓	"Quest for the Holy Grail" / "Da-Vinci-Code-inspired […] adventure"
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"in an unknown room filled with mystical messages and objects"
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"Imagine you were […]"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black, dark red, dark blue

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[2] Entries on this site were translated from Swedish by author

Escape Room by Midgaard Event (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"it is no ordinary challenge that you are facing!" / "designed to test even the sharpest minds" / "save all mankind"
The Boon	✓	"find the key to the Holy Grail"
Adventure	✓	"Ready for an adventure?"
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"Solve the mysteries" / "will draw you into a mystery"
Exploration	✓	"try something you've never seen before"
Immersion & Desires	✓	person seeing himself in the mirror as somebody else
Video Material Included	✓	short video for each room
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✗	white, violet

Exit Games (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✗	
The Boon	✓	"earn your freedom"
Adventure	✓	"be the part of an amazing adventure"
Mystery & The Unknown	✗	
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"Ever wondered how it would feel […]?"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✗	white

Mystery Makers (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"You will become the hero yourself, which makes the experience engaging and powerful"
The Boon	✓	"earn […] your freedom"
Adventure	✓	"Will you dare risking your life?" / "a challenging group trial"
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	name / Sphinx Logo / "place players at the center of the mystery […] The time of mysteries isn't over!"
Exploration	✓	"Play makes you wiser. About yourself, each other and the world"/ "We miss the unknown and the enigmatic that lures us into exploring and viewing the world in new ways"
Immersion & Desires	✓	"Who hasn't dreamed about […]?"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✓	The Killing Room; " a serial killer is on the loose, and you are imprisoned in a mysterious basement"
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	grey

Questrooms (SWE)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✗	
The Boon	✗	
Adventure	✓	questing in the name
Mystery & The Unknown	✗	
Exploration	✓	"Explore the room"
Immersion & Desires	✓	"From the very beginning you'll be fully involved in a breathtaking Story"/ "real-life time travel" / "lots of nostalgic details"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✓	Horror Escape; "Remember the scariest horror movie you watched? Today you'll be in it [...] desperately trying not to be served as a dinner."
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black, grey

Sherlocked (SWE)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	"you and your friends will be the main characters"
The Boon	✓	"find as much gold and jewelries [as] possible"/ "collect as much gold and silver as possible"
Adventure	✓	"throw yourself into an unforgettable adventure"
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"Find the big secret of the game"
Exploration	✓	"nothing seems like it is anymore"
Immersion & Desires	✓	"Leave the reality and follow us back in time!"/ "an experience you will talk about during a loooong time"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	black

Timequest (DK)		
Theme	*Present*	*Example*
Heroism	✓	having to save the world from a deadly plague
The Boon	✗	
Adventure	✓	offering a specific "adventure mission"/ questing in the name
Mystery & The Unknown	✓	"a world full of mysteries and secrets"/ generally very little or vague information on the website which makes it seem secretive
Exploration	✗	
Immersion & Desires	✓	"immerse you and your team in a world"
Video Material Included	✗	
Features a Horror Game	✗	
Predominantly Dark Colour Palette	✓	dark blue, orange

c. Appendix 3: Fieldwork Material

SMMM20 Service Management – Master's Thesis
Alina Both
Contact: 0049 163 4999 175

LUND UNIVERSITY

Fieldwork Agreement

The data generated during this 60-90 minute observation will be used for the completion of a (two year) Master's Thesis in Service Management at Lund University – Campus Helsingborg. Participation in this observation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and participants have the right to withdraw from it at any point in time. The data generated from the observation will be used for academic purposes only. For increased clarity, recordings of the play-through will be made. The complete thesis may be found in the archives of Lund University's student paper database (LUP).

I have read and understood the specifications above, and am willing to participate in the play-through under these conditions.

Date:
_____

Signature:
_____

SMMM20 Service Management – Master's Thesis
Alina Both
Contact: 0049 163 4999 175

LUND UNIVERSITY

Fieldwork Agreement

The data generated during this 60-90 minute observation will be used for the completion of a (two year) Master's Thesis in Service Management at Lund University – Campus Helsingborg. All participants have agreed to being observed and recorded, and are guaranteed anonymity regarding the recording by both researcher and provider. Participation in this observation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and participants have the right to withdraw from it at any point in time. The data generated from the observation will be used for academic purposes only. This means that recordings of the play-through will not be made public by either the researcher or Lund University. Any potentially necessary examinations of the video material will adhere to the same standards of confidentiality. The complete thesis may be found in the archives of Lund University's student paper database (LUP).

Both researcher and provider have read and understood the specifications above, and are willing to collaborate in the research process under these conditions.

Date:

_____

Signatures:

_____

i. Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol

Session: _____ Date/Time: _____ Duration: _____

Area of Interest	Concepts	Observations & Interpretations
World	- Rules? → testing of rules? uncertainty about rules? - exploring/ viewing - Assumptions? - Spending longer amounts of time? - how does behaviour differ from everyday life? - meta-awareness of the situation? - what is the "magic system"? rational / irrational? - level of depth and detail?	
Characters	- Interactions with whom? - Groups of friends - Staff - Communication patterns? - Role of language? → special language? - which roles are taken on? - can patterns of behaviour be detected? phases?	
Motivations	- Where / how do people seem to spend most time? - any notions of learning vs. fun? - Which elements do people interact with most?	

	→ what do people have most fun with (if discernible) - what is people's main motivation to solve the room? → are there conflicting motivations?	
Story	- **Do people interact creatively with some plot elements?** - how is **the central conflict perceived and understood?** - what happens when the heroes fail? - how do players perceive & handle layers of conflict - **meta-awareness of the situation / intertextuality?** → do people try to guess what kind of story they are in & form expectations based on that? - how are elements of **the supernatural / magical accepted or dealt with?**	
Miscellaneous		

ii. Interview Questions Focus Groups

Doing narrative interviews

... Czarniawska:
- ask to describe things and processes in detail
- meaningful insights into subjective views are often expressed by familiar narrative constructs
- try to avoid stylised narratives, relate to concrete circumstances
- look for instances of emplotment (tropes)

... Elliott
- try to get a narrative account of the experience → can show the meaning people attach to an experience
- make it more like a "natural conversation" than a research interview, as storytelling is quite common in everyday speech (and thus also more common in less structured interviews) → the fact that it is a whole group may help me here
- don't interrupt narratives with a new interview question, let the conversation develop
- stimulate the interviewees' interpretive capacities - how do *they* understand things?

Questions

- confront with expectations: how do you feel in relation to what you were thinking about this experience beforehand?
- how did the story influence your perception of the experience?
    - do you think it influenced your playing?
- what made you excited to play this escape room?
- can you describe your play-through? what did you do?
- when xx happened, how did that make you feel?
- what do you take away from this experience?
    - did you discover something about yourself? about your teammates?
- what kind of things did this experience make you think about? Did it make you (re)evaluate something?
- how did you feel about the companion character?
- what was the most enjoyable aspect(s) for you?
- did you, at any point in time, feel a "break" in the experience?
    - if so, why? what do you think caused that?
- have you had previous encounters with escape rooms?
    - if so, did that influence your playing?
    - if previous experience exists: what are your reasons for returning and doing another escape room?
- would you say you slipped into a role during your play-through?
    - did some of the other teammates?
    - why would you say you/ they slipped into that role?
- how free did you feel in influencing the story?
    - what made you feel this way?
- how would you describe the world you entered?

Spontaneous options:
- You mentioned earlier, that…
- Could you further elaborate on that?
- Could you tell us some more about…
- I would like to get back to something you said before…
- could you give me an example of … ?
- relate to specific things / moments seen during the observation: what did xx mean for you? / why did you react to xx the way you did?

iii. Interview Questions Providers

Questions
- How long have you been operating an escape room?
- Why did you decide to open up an escape room in the first place?
- What would you say makes your offer an experience?
- What would constitute a perfect experience for you?
- How/ why did you select the theme(s) for your escape room(s)?
  - which atmosphere are you hoping to convey with them?
- Do you "prepare" your guests in any way for what they are about to experience?
  - do they *need* preparing, in your opinion? i.e. how experienced are guests generally?
- Do you maintain contact with guests during the experience?
  - of which nature is that contact?
- Is there a rough structure to the overall experience?
  - is the design/ conception of the room in any way aiming to influence playing-rhythm?
- How does a "typical" play-through look like for you as the provider?
- How do you feel when seeing customers interact with what you provide?
- What would you hope that customers take away from visiting your escape room(s)?
- What do you see as the main appeal of your offer?
- How do you go about conceptualising a new offer?
- What role do you play in the guests' overall experience?
- Do you see yourself as a storyteller?
- How important would you say is the detail and believability of the room(s)?
- How would you say does your experience offering interact with other texts/ media?
  - was intertextuality / creating an immediately recognisable context important to you when choosing the theme of the escape room(s)?

Gatsby Maze Specific
- your website proclaims "immersive experiences about humanity": could you explain the choice of that slogan a little more closely?

Spontaneous options:
- You mentioned earlier, that…
- Could you further elaborate on that?
- Could you tell us some more about…
- I would like to get back to something you said before…
- could you give me an example of … ?