

A Stitch in Time: Get lost in space at TimeZone

Pieter Martens is exactly the kind of tour guide you might expect for TimeZone, moving with the speed of a Belgian version of Looney Tunes' Tasmanian Devil, constantly narrating the themes for the various parts of this mini theme park, without ever giving away the tricks to the various games within.

"And this room is set in the ancient Mayan Empire," he says, ushering our little group of time traveling adventurers into our third or fourth room in as many minutes. "Of course, it's very good for your leg muscles, because you have to bend down a lot." Of course. Wait, what? Ancient Mayan squats? There's no further explanation, but we quickly figure out this is a sort of basketball variant. There are giant stone hoop targets, iron bars and balls you bend down to carefully recover through those bars. There's also a countdown clock, and enough adrenaline that none of felt the workout until much later.

Imagine if everything at a place like Dave and Buster's was tied together with one narrative and one scoring system. Then add in some more brainteasers, balancing acts, climbing and artistic ambiance and you've got a sense of what TimeZone feels like.

TimeZone launched this month within Lincoln's R1 Entertainment Center, which also hosts an arcade, axe throwing and go kart racing (not at the same time). TimeZone is a new idea, conceived in Martens' feverish imagination and executed by local artists, many from The Reliquarium, an artist collective best known for creating high-end stage designs for international music festivals. The Reliquarium happens to be right up the road from TimeZone.

Our small band was traveling through space. There's a video that explains all this (and there are humans around if you need them, although not everyone gets their own whirling dervish of a guide / inventor). So we're traveling through space, right, and our ship hits a time anomaly — one that probably escaped from some classic Trek episode. That space-iceberg collision throws different rooms in the ship into different eras and parts of the universe, leaving us to solve various challenges presented by these different times. There are also Easter eggs along the way that add up to a solution that will rescue our starship from permanent time dysphoria and save us from having to interact with our younger, dumber selves.

One room involved speed math, which prompted my teammates to immediately pull out their cell phones and launch calculator apps. "That's OK, yes. It's not against the rules," our guide told us, although he clearly preferred the challenge of doing his own math in his head.

Another room let us shoot cannons (armed with tennis balls) at pirates. One involved assessing dinosaurs based on color, size and deadliness, while a third involved code breaking. Yet another required us to master the art of the group selfie. Each room has a display outside to let you know if another team is in there, and to inform players of the speed, strength, balance and intelligence needed to escape from that particular time vortex.

"I appreciated the diversity of the interactive experience," said local educator and artist Jade Sisti, part of our improvised team. "Each room presented different types of challenges. Choosing your group well seems like a crucial element — this takes the best aspects of escape rooms and lets each person play to their strengths. Nobody's at a permanent disadvantage — everyone can work together, which made it really unique. It's well rounded, so everybody's useful in different ways at different times, whether it's

physical or mental or draws on experience. Like, I would do really well on the balance challenges next time, as long as I remember not to wear heels. A lot of my friends would not.”

“It seems pretty ideal for a quick date, too,” added fellow first-time player Genevieve Flowers, who quickly became known for doing math in her head and staying on balance beams across seas of molten lava. “Like speed dating, but better because you can get a sneak peak into every aspect of a potential date — teamwork, strength, agility, brains...”

Motif had early previews of the facility when it was in progress over COVID summer. It’s fascinating to see some of the complicated mechanics come to life — and to see how much has changed and evolved as the development team worked on bringing the trapped space vessel to life. That includes materials that lend themselves to easy sanitization, and simplifications to game play.

One of the rooms that was among the last to come together was originally going to be a climbing challenge set inside the carcass of a giant space dragon. Now it’s a different kind of climbing game aimed at saving a struggling colony of bees. I ask Martens what happened to the desiccated dragon concept. “It didn’t work,” he says simply. Onward and upward! Saving the bees seems like it does work, although none of us can make it on the first try. That would be too easy.

The entire game, or sport, or activity — it’s a bit hard to define this thing — is in some ways a giant beta test for Martens and his game designers. They’re carefully tracking what visitors of all ages like and don’t like, constantly tweaking the difficulty of the challenges. “Some people have told us this opening is too small,” he says, angling his 6-foot-plus frame through an Arabian-style window in one room. “Maybe, but only one person from a team needs to go in there, so it works for now.” You can almost see him sizing up where the chainsaw might be applied to that problem in the near future.

“I would love to build up to having team competitions and a league play element,” says Martens, absentmindedly shuffling a series of RFID necklaces, the keys to the kingdom. Er, starship. “And then soon, when we have made enough mistakes to know what works, I hope we can roll out TimeZones all over the country, each customized to its city and the interests of the people there. Here, we have a couple of Lovecraft-themed rooms that will probably only ever be in Rhode Island. We have 25 rooms here. But we have games for at least 50 rooms, someday. And we are always having new ideas.”

Names may have been changed to protect the secret identities of certain time travelers. Thank you, future selves. You can schedule your own trip through time at r1kart.com/motif. TimeZone, an Axe Bar and R1 Indoor Karting are located at 1000 Higginson Ave, Lincoln RI.