Parties as Playful Experiences
Why Game Studies Should Study Partying

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Abstract

Partying is a widespread, understudied, and playful phenomena. Game Studies has seen great value from defining important concepts related to games since its inception. Foundational play and game scholars urged for a need to analyze parties and celebrations as a form of playfulness, yet there is little empirical Game Studies work enabling a deeper understanding of partying. Partying bears striking resemblances to games: inefficient use of resources, arbitrary rules, cultural group formation, and ongoing moral panics. There are also practical overlaps: games occur at parties and digital party games are quite popular. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of parties by analyzing 33 semi-structured interviews where individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds had highly playful experiences at parties. A new theoretical conception of partying as a form of playfulness is proposed as a "phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity". This work concludes with a call for *party studies* to become a sub-field in game studies.

Keywords

Parties; partying; playfulness; playful experience; party studies

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Parties and partying are a central feature of normal life for many people across the world. Partying has been described as an important *rite of passage* and developmental phase for adolescents starting to socialize as adults (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Demant & Østergaard 2007) and a way adults create identity in social groups (Sutton-Smith 2009). In informal terms, partying is ubiquitous every weekend in most major cities. Large groups of people drinking, going to dance clubs, dancing with their friends or strangers is a crucial enough concept for those who do it that it has informal terms implying it is its own form of life termed "nightlife" (Nofre et al. 2018). This is not the only revealing colloquial implication that would associate partying as a core part of life, as regular participation in sex parties also has frequently been

Erratum 7 January 2025: A typo in Jaakko Stenros' name on the title page has been corrected.

termed being in the "lifestyle" (Harviainen & Frank 2018). This importance can furthermore be linguistically sublimated into identity such as adult gay male partygoers in Sydney, Australia who sometimes refer to themselves as "party boys" (Hurley & Prestage 2009). This kind of casual terminology implies a critical importance to parties and normalization for those who participate. This is furthermore supported by empirical studies on those who regularly attend parties defining it as a core part of life such as occurring at American colleges (Pedersen & LaBrie 2007) and electronic dance parties in both the Netherlands (Ter Bogt & Engel 2005) and Southwest England (Riley et al. 2010). These forms of partying are clearly quite essential in people's lives, yet despite this prominence, partying is rarely studied as a general human activity.

Foundational theoretical texts on play and playfulness such as Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* (2009) and Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies* (2017) have argued for the study of parties in connection to human capacity to structure, organize, and facilitate play. Recent works have demonstrated the benefit of analyzing party activities in and through games (e.g. Harviainen & Frank 2018). Game Studies and the video game press have a history of ignoring and excluding players who are not interested in popular commercial and indie games, including those who play party-games (Scharkow et al. 2015). Parties may represent a powerful method of re-including players who do not identify as (core) gamers in their relationships to games. This is reinforced by how, in defining "queerness" in games, Ruberg (2018) first brings up play-parties. Clearly labeled "Party Games" are also commonly listed in genre descriptions for video games for sale (Arsenault 2009; Scharkow et al. 2012) though sometimes put in the ambiguous "Miscellaneous" Category (Gackenbach & Bown 2011). This exclusion from a "core gamer" image may explain why some genre descriptions seem to have no description or discussion of party games (Clarke et al. 2017) and furthermore may explain why one study analyzing overlooked genres by game researchers concluded "[t]hese underrepresented genres include mobile, "casual" and browser games, *party games*, platform games, and sports games." (Coavoux et al. 2017, emphasis added). In addition, widely played non-digital party games, such as *Werewolf* (Bi & Tanaka 2016), *Twister* (Poremba 200/9, and *Mafia* (Demyenov et al. 2015) appear to have limited analysis in Game Studies. There exists no empirical work on what would make a playful experience party-like or whether parties are seen by participants as connected to playfulness.

Considering that partying is widespread, is a common game genre, and is lacking generalizable work on the topic, there is a major gap left in the literature: *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying? How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within partying?* This work will provide qualitative interview data on this topic from 33 experiences where individuals describe how they had highly playful experiences at parties. These interviews provide a critical insight into the nature and motivations of partying. Since the original goal of the interview had no association to partying specifically, but rather was targeting experiences that participants considered highly playful, the emergence of partying as a context for highly playful experiences was an emergent and critical feature to the data.

In this way, there is fruitful territory behind a more thorough understanding of party experiences for game studies. The mediating role of playfulness brings a theoretical connection from partying as an activity to game studies as a field interested in designed playful experiences. This work will conclude with a full-throated argument that game studies should move further towards this kind of broader analysis of engagement-oriented phenomena, and partying is a premier example of potential benefits for such a move. In summation, game studies would be benefited by creating an academic sub-discipline that builds on and defines *party studies*.

Background

Research on parties can be found from a diversity of sources, in part because there is no established "party studies" literature. Three pools of past research will be addressed for context: theoretical work in game studies, empirical studies on risks and dangers of partying, and motivations of inferred or explicitly labelled partygoers. In defining which studies are important to include in this overview, it is relevant to address that most studies that discuss partying do not use theoretical or definitional criteria. Past works generally ask survey respondents specifically about the word "partying" (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Doxbeck & Osberg 2021; Grov et al. 2014) or study spaces that are already labeled as "parties" (Riley et al. 2010) or study other terms that imply partying such as "drinking at pubs" (Törrönen & Maunu 2005) or "nightlife" (Eldridge 2019; Kramer & Wittman 2023). This works acceptably in their context, where often partying is such an entrenched culture of activity that an ostensive definition creates a clear image for the reader. Studies have analyzed behaviors associated with partying such as Nichols (1993) and Törrönen & Maunu (2005) who describe drinking alcohol as an activity occurring at parties. Night-tourism is similarly a concept addressing night-time drinking (Eldridge 2019) which has also been presented as occurring at parties (Hunt et al. 2010). None of these works define parties however, and without a definition it is difficult to connect these studies with partying across varying contexts, such as different cultures (e.g., one in which alcohol is not regularly consumed) or different ages.

Scholars have argued for theoretical analysis of partying by connecting it to broader play-phenomena. Sutton-Smith (2009) argued for the inclusion of "Festivals, Parades, Parties" (p. 213) as a form of identity-creation play. Schechner (2017) argued for the importance of analyzing religious ceremony, carnival, and even birthday parties (p. 53) in performance studies. In more contemporary game studies, there have been publications analyzing sex parties (Harviainen & Frank 2018) and parties hosting drinking games (Sotamaa & Stenros 2019). The social functions and meanings of gatherings that could be called parties—such as liminal events including rituals, rites of passages, ceremonies, and carnivals—have also been studied in anthropology, sociology, and literature studies (e.g. Turner 2008; Bakhtin 1984; Goffman 1974). Despite this theoretical interest, there has not been a wide-spread effort to define this theoretical behavior sufficiently to empirically understand how parties occur as

a playful practice in particular contexts. This frames the first research question: *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying?*

Past empirical studies on partying seem to instead be highly focused on repetitive subgroups—namely, *teenagers* (Bærndt & Kolind 2021; Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Demant & Østergaard 2007; Doxbeck & Osberg 2021; Larson & Seepersad 2003; Pedersen & LaBrie 2007), recreational illegal *drug users* (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Hammoud et al. 2017; Hunt et al. 2010; Riley et al. 2010; Ter Bogt & Engel 2005), and *gay men* (Hammoud et al. 2017; Hurley & Prestage 2009; Mimiaga et al. 2011; Solomon et al. 2011). Based on the amount of academic focus on these populations, some may be tempted to think that they are the largest three groups who engage in partying, a conclusion that virtually no article argues. The more undeniable connection is that these are marginalized groups whose behavior is easy to criticize from an outside point-of-view, whose party behaviors are often criminalized and thus are prime targets for an ongoing *moral panic* about partying (Bowman 2015).

Most empirical studies on "partying" focus upon those who are breaking legal restrictions. Studies on parties with teens feature alcohol consumption by people probably under the legal drinking age, such as Danish teenagers aged 14-16 (Demant & Østergaard 2007) where the legal drinking age is 16, and studies of teenagers and age-unspecified college students in the United States (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Pedersen & LaBrie 2007; Reed et al. 2011), where the legal drinking age is 21, and college attendance often starts by the age of 18. Other studies feature illegal acts occurring at the parties, most commonly the use of illegal drugs (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Grov et al. 2014; Hurley & Prestage 2009; Mimiaga et al. et al. 2011; Riley et al. 2010; Ter Bogt & Engel 2005), violent behaviors (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Hughes & Short; 2014; Hunt et al. 2010; Törrönen & Maunu 2007), violating Covid-19 lockdown regulations (Holm 2021, Osberg & Doxbeck 2021), and sexual assault (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Sweeney 2011; Törrönen & Maunu 2007). There are only a minority of studies that address parties and do not discuss criminalized behavior as a major element of the partying, such as Harvianen and Frank (2018) who discuss illegal drug use, but only briefly, or Larson and Seepersad (2001) and O'Neill (2012) who mention no illegal behavior.

This focus on illegal parties is probably related to how these works mostly study potential harms of partying such as their connection to "HIV risk behaviors" (Mimiaga et al. 2011) "public health issues" (Doxbeck & Osberg 2021, p.1554) "high-risk sex behavior" (Cepeda & Valdez 2003, p.102) and "alcohol related negative consequences" (Pedersen & LaBrie 2007, abstract). It is possible that dangerous behaviors are more likely to occur within criminalized parties. However, primarily focusing upon parties with criminal behavior rhetorically implies partying should be seen as somehow unacceptable or forbidden by society. This depiction of parties as at odds with normal society is also explicit in several studies on partying. For example, O'Neill (2012) justifies their study on partying among managers in the hotel industry by discussing how parties have "deleterious effect on employees' ability to balance

their work and family lives" (p. 84). This description of parties with being at odds with both work and family seems to signal a strong isolation between parties and society at large. Night-tourism is also marked by similar descriptions of it being against society at large where it "has been marked by concerns about anti-social behaviour" (Eldridge 2019 p. 423). Kramer & Wittman (2023) imply this same problem when they position their work as studying nightlife "not only its usual negatively connotated space of sexual violence, oppression, and injustices" (p. 3).

This negative and socially isolated position of partying is in direct contrast to how participants describe their own lived experiences in parties as a component of normal and societally supported life. Danish teenagers describe party-drinking as a key part of their social life (Demant & Østergaard 2007), with studies even emphasizing how muslim teens in Denmark suffer socially from *not* engaging in partying and drinking (Bærndt & Kolind 2021). Other discussions describe it as a part of a normal social life (Larson and Seepersad 2001) and a healthy social life (Kramer & Wittman 2023). Partiers do not generally describe their own party experiences as illegal or societally forbidden, but rather socially approved of spaces for accepted forms of "light transgression" (Törrönen & Maunu 2007; Kramer & Wittman 2023). Past studies have theorized parties as an ideal space for individuals to assert autonomy over potentially oppressive social norms (Riley & Griffin 2010; Tsui 2022) and expression of authenticity (Törrönen & Maunu 2005). In this way, we can see how the critical choice of investigating how partiers see themselves, and their own party experiences in general, are an important and underrepresented approach to the topic.[1]

When party motivations have been studied in past works, they generally conclude with a focus on positive emotion and social contact. One study on male partygoers in Sydney, Australia does discuss intensive sex partying through a wider lens of "pleasure maximizing" during sex while participants are simultaneously engaged in "risk reduction" regarding the spread of HIV (Hurley & Prestage 2009). Partying has been analyzed for teenagers as the most positive emotions they experience each week (Larson & Seepersad 2003, p. 57). Studies on MDMA drug use in rave parties in the Netherlands argued that party goers are motivated by a desire for emotions, such as euphoria, energy, and sociability and not motivated by problem-solving motives such as coping or conformity (Ter Bogt & Engel 2005). Similarly, another study on reasons to participate in electronic dance music culture, found participants were primarily interested in sociality and pleasure, and how those experiences informed a multiplicity of identities and self-expressions (Riley et al. 2010). Group drinking at parties has also been associated generally with "pleasure, enjoyment, and sociability" (Bærndt & Kolind 2021, p. 1). Studies on Finnish drinking culture discuss how

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[1] There is brief mention of parties associated with major holidays in many cultures such as Halloween parties in the United States (Belk, 1990), or Carnival parties in Germany (Salzbrunn 2014). These works however do not spend much time analyzing the *partying* that they reference.

individuals view authentic socializing (Törrönen & Maunu 2005) and socializing amidst light transgression (Törrönen & Maunu 2007) are both critical motivations. This opens up a general door of how the "partying" experience may or may not be unique to other engaging experiences, such as playing non-party games, or other forms of designed play. These studies are however limited to the narrow populations they study, so this frames the third research question: *How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within partying specifically?*

Methods

The dataset used for this work is a subset of a semi-structured interview process that was carried out at mid-sized Finnish university from spring 2019 through winter 2021 on the topic of playfulness. International students from a diversity of backgrounds were asked to reflect on a "highly playful experience" or "the experience often associated with play, where since it is an internal experience, you may be doing any type of activity" (Interview Guide). This was further clarified for the interviewees that any interpretation of playfulness they may have was considered relevant, a technique derived from content-empty definitions in micro phenomenology (Petitmengin 2006, p. 248).

Interviewees were theoretically selected for diversity in national background (Teppo 2015), and recommendations from past interviewees. This interview process gathered a total of 125 highly playful experiences from 84 interviewees, ages 18-39 (avg. 25), from a diversity of national backgrounds (N=43), both in-person or online, taking an average of 64 minutes per interview. The interviewer was living in an international exchange student dormitory at the time, approached each person as a peer, and interviewed them in natural private settings. All participants had the study explained to them, filled out privacy and consent forms as required by local legal standards, and were informed of how their interviews were being analyzed with a chance to disagree with the researcher's interpretation. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudonymized, and analyzed without software by the first author. Thirty-three of these highly playful experiences occurred during what the participant called partying and this subset is the primary data set for the current analysis.

The semi-structured interview collection utilized a triangulation of methodologies (Thurmond 2001) between Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 2017), Micro Phenomenology (Petitmengin 2006) and Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Yin 2015). First, Grounded Theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin 1997) were utilized primarily as a method of bottom-up elicitation of participant's interpretive views and ongoing theoretical development categorizing those views across a theoretically chosen participant pool. Specifically, the following elements of Grounded Theory methods were utilized: constant comparative analysis, open and intermediate coding, theoretical sampling and saturation, theoretical integration of codes and categories, and concurrent and continuous data generation and analysis, and theoretical sampling

(Teppo 2015). Second, Micro-phenomenology was used primarily for enabling interviewees to recall complicated elements of specific memories and more accurately deconstruct important sequential aspects of those memories. In specific, the following interview stabilization considerations were applied: stabilization of attention, focusing upon a singular experience, refocusing from what to how, focusing on different dimensions of experience, retrospective analysis (re-enactment) and scale of precision (Petitmengin 2006). Finally, a broader qualitative thematic analysis technique was used to analyze how specific types of words, in this case parties, partying, and other associated terms were present in individuals' experiences, using a five-phase thematic analytic process (Yin 2015).

The current work focuses upon a subset of 33 of these highly playful experiences that occurred at parties. During the larger Grounded Theory data analysis, partying was an emergent theme. This work analyzes the subset of experiences labeled as partying. Each partying experience was read several times, the experience they described was re-organized to create a timeline of how the experience occurred (Petitmengin 2006), important factors described about the experience were given codes, these coded important passages were connected between experiences, with larger explanatory codes and finally themes were determined (Yin 2015). An overall theoretical conception and explanation was created (Glaser & Strauss 2017). These party experiences were diverse nationally, with participants from 23 different national backgrounds, from all 6 continents, describing party experiences. Participants had party experiences at a diversity of ages (8-25) with an average age of 20. Fifteen of the playful party experiences were had by women, 17 by men, and one person who wished to not disclose their gender. In general, the age, national background, and gender of participants will not be discussed unless the participant viewed those elements as important to the playful party experience they had, or if it is important for contextualizing their experience.

Analysis

By analyzing 33 highly playful experiences at parties, the following conception of playful experiences with parties can be seen: *Highly playful partying is a phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity*. There are furthermore three important types of social connection frequently associated with parties in the sample. First, parties are used as social tools between strangers to develop connection in a first interaction. Second, parties are ritualized events in friend groups and families to reinforce patterns of social connection. Third, parties are structural tools of societies, states, and cultures for reinforcing social connection over a larger group and during liminal changes in cultural identity. These three social groupings are not necessarily exclusive but have distinctive characteristics that will be explored. The nature of engaging mediating activity generally includes conversation between people and frequently includes the consumption of food, alcohol, or mind-altering substances, gift giving,

shared group music, and playing games. Importantly, partying was a labeled space by participants where highly playful experiences were supported in a unique way. The way that participants discussed partying speaks to them viewing parties as generally a space *defined by* their attempt to support playful experiences.

This conception and its methodology speak to how playfulness exists in parties. While this very well might have broader meaning for parties in general, this data cannot speak to non-playful partying. In essence, parties host a specific type of highly playful behavior and that is what this paper is focusing on. Like any complicated phenomena it is inevitable that parties also host plenty of other behaviors and experiences not discussed in this work.

Parties connecting strangers

Clubbing, networking events, party games

Parties that create social connection between strangers is the first manner of partying. In this type of party experience, a group of strangers is brought together, often spontaneously, and share an engaging activity. Usually, the party is initiated by a previously established friend group entering the party together but then separating and participating in the party activities with people that were previously unknown. During this activity, such as drinking alcohol, eating food, or listening to music, first time conversations are supported between strangers. As a result of these first-time conversations supported by the party activity, the participant described an elevated or quickened sense of social connection. One example of such a sense of social connection would be a person flirting at a party and feeling like another person is flirting back.

One example of such a stranger-connecting party experience is described here:

> I joined the university for the first time, and I just got into a hostel life, and when it happens, so you meet a lot of people... and out of the spirit of adventure, my friend asked us, would you like to go and meet my girlfriend. And it's a great day, you know we have a party, and you should join...It was good meeting different people, interacting with girls for the first time, that was new to me at the age of 17... We interacted we had a good conversation... Whenever you talk to someone for the first time you get a very good feeling when someone flirts back (E101)

This experience is insightful for multiple reasons. First, the partying represents the pattern of an established friend bringing a group of previous strangers together. The supporting activities included eating food at a restaurant, and the giving of gifts. Through these activities first time conversations are facilitated and the participant felt that others were sharing the same feeling of flirtation that they were. In this context, the act of rule-breaking, or meeting people of the opposite gender for the first time was a key facilitative component of the activity. This is similar to another

experience where alcohol played a fundamental facilitative role. When asked to reflect on what was feeling playful for them at a first-time party experience at university they said

> I think I feel more playful when I was drunk. I go to the club and hear loud music see many people probably, cool atmosphere. I want to do some more new activities... making friends with strangers, playing soccer indoors.... many mini games (E50)

This experience followed a similar pattern: A group of friends went to a party, the friends split up and experienced the facilitative activities of music, drinking, and playing a series of party-games with strangers. The participant talked and engaged with strangers and felt a sense of connection. Importantly, both experiences involved flirtatious activities reinforced by boundary-pushing of appropriate behavior, but neither involved illegal activity. Some stranger-connecting party experiences did not involve conversation, but rather intensive shared activity with de-facto physical communication. Experience 3 involved a participant dancing with a stranger for the first time at a large musical festival and defined a key part of their experience as being in "A sort of hive mind. You are one with the audience and connecting with people." (E3). Parties connecting strangers are often first-time experiences in the sample (E21; 50; 91; 101) but not always (E3). Experiences frequently include eating food (E50; 70), music (E3; 50), alcohol (E12; 21; 50; 91), playing games (E50; 70; 91) and flirtation or sexual activities (E12; 50; 91; 101). Most commonly these experiences feature talking as the primary activity (E12; 21; 50; 70; 101). In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting strangers: A party where a group of individuals, previously unknown, build first time social connection through a mediating and engaging party activity. These party activities are almost always facilitated by conversation and through alcohol or food consumption, flirtation, music, and games.

Parties reinforcing connections with family and friend groups

Game nights, barbecues, drinks with friends

The second type of social connection created at parties is a reinforcing of previous social connection in established friend groups and families. This type of party is generally ritualized and repeated by a social group often with a discrete schedule, such as occurring every year. These parties are repeated often for many years, with de facto names that the participants know and come to expect such as 'game night,' 'the family summer barbecue,' or 'Friday night drinking with coworkers.' These groups share an activity that is well known to be engaging for the group of people involved. By engaging in this ritualized activity, social connections are reinforced, and a sense of community is created. These social groups are generally previously established, and the participants are known before the beginning of the party. These party activities are most commonly the playing of games, and the consumption of

food and alcohol. An example of this kind of party would be an annual tradition of playing a board game with the extended family during a holiday vacation.

Experience 31 depicts this form of social connection occurring through parties well. In this experience a family has an annual ritual of playing the sport *volleyball* together at a group barbecue. It is the one time of the year where the whole family comes together, and the *volleyball* game was described as a key component. The family eats food and consumes alcohol together and engage in lots of active joking and playful "trash talking" surrounding the *volleyball* game. When the participant was asked what they are paying attention to the most during the game they say

> paying attention to my team, what we were doing, just really making sure that everyone's having fun. Like if I saw that it was like getting too competitive, if people are getting like too argumentative over the rules I'd try to crack a joke (E31).

In this experience, the participant emphasized that who won the game was less important than that everyone had the same type of, generally competitive, fun experience playing *volleyball*. This demonstrates how shared game experiences can be instruments for generating social connection at parties. If the game itself mattered more than the social connection through the game, then it would not fit the same pattern of how games at parties were present in the sample.

Game playing was a common activity throughout these parties. Other games discussed included other sports such as *wrestling* (E38), physical games from childhood (E37), video games (E20; 34; 83), adult drinking games (E19; 32) and imagination-based games (E40; 99). A valuable contrast party experience with a game is Experience 83, where a group of adult friends have an annual tradition of playing the video game *Minecraft* near Christmas time. When asked what kinds of feelings this party creates, they described:

> Fun, freedom to do anything. Kind of imagination... there's a spirit of like embracing every dumb idea because it could result in something fun... we've done it so many times. It's kind of like tradition, that is special. But moreover, we have all our friends together with no restrictions on the time and everybody is just fully engaged in just messing around in this world, and trying to come up with creative ideas, like spontaneously, but that's the core of it. (E83)

While this shared game-experience is highly different from the *volleyball* experience from before, the unifying factor is that the game is creating a singular experience between all participants. This experience also emphasized the importance of the *Minecraft* ritual for the friend group, as it was the only time of the year they all got together. Ritualized party behaviors were frequently described as key components for how larger social groups, often who lived far apart, maintained connection (E31; 36; 37; 83). Other party-experiences included established friend groups where the

participant felt closest to their friend group during a semi-regular party tradition (E34; 40; 89; 106; 116). In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting Friend Groups and Families: A party where a pre-established group of individuals reinforce social connection through an established, mediating, engaging party activity. These party activities are often facilitated by game play experiences, but also frequently include consumption of food or alcohol. This activity is often ritualized, occurring at specific times of the year when participants make sure they are available.

Parties reinforcing connection with society

Festivals, holidays, birthday parties, weddings

The third type of social connection created at parties is the reinforcing of a larger community and society through culturally entrenched parties. These types of parties usually have long-standing names and customs that are taught to the participants as fundamental, normal, and scheduled in a yearly calendar. For example, this category includes festival parties, holiday parties, and birthday parties. The activities associated with such parties are previously established by a culture and participants have little role in changing or making the activities associated with them. In addition, several of these predetermined types of parties include liminal rituals such as graduation parties, and entrance to university parties. It is common for these types of parties to co-occur with interactions between strangers, as well as friend groups. By engaging in these culturally pre-defined activities a sense of larger community is fostered and connection is formed, not just between the individuals involved but rather with the larger sense of society. These kinds of parties can also occur during liminal periods of participant lives, where their cultural identity is changing, and the party is used as a way of connecting them to the larger social group as their new identity. These parties include multiple engaging activities most frequently consumption of specific cultural food, alcohol, as well as making music. An example of this party would be a cultural holiday such as Christmas, or a graduation party occurring at the end of a study degree.

These culturally connecting parties are generally well understood by the party organizers and often considered deeply important. Some participants talked about their most playful experience as being the responsible person for organizing a successful cultural party (E1; 77). These participants showed a similar awareness of responsibility towards creating a successful, socially connecting party. One participant was a leader at a university social organization and ran the entrance parties for incoming students and said their primary thinking was

> It just feels so like so hard when you enter this kind of like huge environment and you get rejected and you can't make friends and you don't know how things go around. So It felt like a big deal to not make people

> feel rejected even though if they didn't want to participate, like to show that they were welcome anyway, if they wanted to be. (E1)

In this sense, the participant had a feeling that at the beginning of university it was fundamentally important that students socially bond as a larger community, a culture of "students". The participant was responsible for the party and thus felt a responsibility to enact this larger community priority. Experience 77 presented a similar responsibility feeling, where a participant saw a child's birthday party as being poorly organized and felt like the children were being let down. As they said the party had "hired an emcee [Master of Ceremonies]. And the guy he showed up and did everything really fast. So, the kids were looking gloomy and sad because there was nothing fun to do. I picked up the mic and tried to organize games and dance sessions and stuff." (77). These two experiences demonstrate that the participants had such familiarity with both successful, connecting parties, and unsuccessful parties that they not only could recognize bad party running, but felt an imperative to run a party well.

Other participants demonstrate that well-run cultural parties were indeed treated as very important, often having official, paid, organizers (E1; 6; 22; 71; 77; 84). These parties were also connected to larger cultural events, such as the end of high school education (E13; 22). The party activities were so well established, that there were also participants who had their most playful experience humorously transgressing the primary party activity. In one experience a group of friends found it deeply funny to attend a graduation ritual, where they would normally drink lots of alcohol in costume on a boat, but instead *did not* drink lots of alcohol, while still being in costume on a boat (E22). When these cultural and communal parties had annual repetition, they were often described as creating a specific sense of connection with the time of year they would occur. In other words, enforcing the essential experience of a holiday through a party. One participant described their most playful party experience as a holiday festival where they would travel with friends, playing instruments, and receiving specific holiday food from strangers saying

> you go along with your friends and go to the village, and it's related to recreational activities, like singing and dancing. And you also get money doing it. It's not like they are paying me but it's more like religious values there. But I think it more in a cultural way than religious... I would say like the vibe is like deep down like when you hear the buzz of the of the instrument. It's already like connecting me. You're so carefree. An amazing moment. (E63)

This kind of immediate emotional reaction where participants described feeling a particular emotion even thinking about the time or place of such a party was also described by other participants for other cultural holiday parties (E18; 83). Key to this form of partying is a sense that the participant is being connected to a larger

cultural group or one's position in this group, such as an identity of becoming a student or a member of a cultural heritage. Birthday parties are also revealing because they demarcate a transition in one's cultural identity: the age that others should see you as. In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting Societies and Cultures: A party where a culture or community of individuals, reinforce social connection through a previously educated and entrenched set of engaging party rituals. These party activities are often facilitated by consumption of food, alcohol, music, costumes, and game playing. This type of partying is also tied to liminal changes in cultural identity.

Discussion

Playful experiences at parties are an important part of many people's lives around the planet. Due to partying not being a sought-after topic of the larger interview study, partying as an emergent category has a unique capacity to understand the overlap of playful experience and party experience. In essence, this technique best addresses when parties are considered highly playful what about them is playful and what about them is considered a party?

Playful party experiences generally utilize the power of engaging activities to facilitate a social connection between individuals, groups, and societies. The exact types of activities at a party are highly diverse and idiosyncratic, as with all playful activities, but often center around consuming food and inhibition reducing drugs, dancing to and creating music, giving gifts, playing games, and most importantly, talking. The most important feature to a party is whether a social connection is facilitated. If a party fails to facilitate a social connection between its participants, it is generally considered an unsuccessful party. Successfully creating social connections in the group is often considered a highly important goal to reach and in culturally repeated parties, the people who organize them will often feel a responsibility to build such an environment. Interestingly, succeeding at making a socially connecting party is often seen as a playful experience itself. Parties were described across a wide variety of cultures, and across a wide variety of ages. In this way a new definition of highly playful partying is argued. *Highly playful partying is a phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity*.

This new definition of a party enables a more unified discussion on the phenomenon and hopefully inspires future research on the interconnections between parties, other cultural celebrations, play, playfulness, and games. This work also reinforces the findings of past works on party motivations. In response to the first research question *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying?* The answer is assertive an unambiguous: When asked about playful experiences individuals decided to talk about party experiences almost 25% of the time. While percentages

should not be overvalued in qualitative work, this degree of repetition shows that individuals perceive a deep connection between partying and playfulness in their lives. In addition, numerous individuals measured the success or failure of parties, in general, based on the degree of elicited playfulness they were able to achieve in the party-goers. This offers the tantalizing possibility that in fact parties in general are goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience.

In response to question 2: *How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within specifically partying?* This analysis defines partying as connected to and transforming playfulness in two ways. On one level, parties use activities such as playing games, drinking, or listening or making music in a playful way. This playful way aligns with past theoretical conceptions that they *prioritize engagement* (Masek 2024). In simple language, party activities seek participation and desire to participate from players, much like games and other play activities. Then on a second level, partying leverages these *engagement-prioritizing activities* to *prioritize engagement* between *people* at the party. In essence, creating a double layer of engagement: an engaging party activity is meant to connect people at the party. This secondary layer of playfulness as instrument for social connection was different than other forms of playful experiences reported by participants in the study.

To clarify the depth and meaning of this difference a contrasting example will be unpacked. One experience (20) started with the participant being at a party with their friends. During this party, their friends were playing the group sports game FIFA and then they started playing the RPG-Shooter game the *Binding of Isaac*. In the beginning, the participant was engaged in social play, with their friend playing the *Binding of Isaac* they described "I remember that it was a lot of fun to play with friends, because there's no multiplayer. But whenever my friend was beside me, like we were chatting about the game, like, Oh, we should look at what I got. Stuff like that. And that made it more fun." (E20). In this context we can see how the game itself was furthermore facilitating social connection. However, as the participant played game more they became more involved with the desire to win the game. This desire to win took their attention and made the experience no longer a social one. They described how the game was designed such that "it's really easy to die if you lose concentration. So, it requires you to be really, like inside the game... I completely forgot about my friends" (E20). In this way, we see how a highly attention-demanding goal-based game is still seen as playful but does not match the definition for party-style playfulness. This speaks to, at least in this context, how the design of *Binding of Isaac* was not conducive to a party-type style of playful experience: By demanding high degrees of attention to avoid loss it replaced attention that was building social connection between friends. This opens a larger question of how or if party-games use mechanics to facilitate social connection and avoid social disconnection.

This work also offers a broader basis to criticize the past empirical focus on criminalized partying. Experiences in this sample do involve some rule-bending, rule-

breaking, and potentially criminal activity. Underage drinking is an activity that occurs at parties. In addition to rule breaking, there is also rule following and rule enforcing that occurs at parties. In addition to underage drinking, there is plenty of overage drinking. In essence, consuming alcohol to reduce inhibitions is a party activity no matter the legal status of the people doing it. Sex and flirtation are also common activities at parties. In addition, family activities and childhood birthday rituals are equally common activities to occur at parties. The only realistic conclusion that can be drawn is that people at a variety of ages in virtually every culture in the dataset have parties. Criminal partying exists because parties of all types exist. Unlike most empirical research on parties there is no reason to think that most parties are criminal or socially unsupported in their context. In this way, studying partying as exclusively disruptive to normal life appears to be highly misleading.

Conclusion

Game studies has benefited greatly by understanding the plurality of culturally important forms of games, game-related, and playful phenomena humans express. One form of human playfulness that is widely important for culture, has practical significance for game designers, and has yet to be adequately addressed by game studies, is partying. The association of parties with illegal or dangerous activities is most realistically like other moral panics associated with games and playful activities (Karlsen 2015). Parties focused upon underage drinking, illegal drug use, and the spread of STIs is clearly meant to focus on parties that, like certain game activities, could be "perceived to threaten social order" (Mortensen & Linderoth 2015, p. 6). Indeed, moral panics are an observed component of several forms of games and play including moral panics surrounding digital games (Karlsen 2015; Markey & Ferguson 2017), specifically competitive games (Puri & Pugliese 2012), role playing games (Laycock 2015; Waldron 2005), and even other entertainment media such as movies (Bowman 2015). The fact that parties and games can share such a socially condemned state, while being normal activities for the wide variety of people who do them, is a revealing overlap on the moralization of playfulness that should be studied further.

Game studies is the correct field to study partying further. It is uniquely positioned for this kind of endeavor due to its relative youth creating an environment of multi-disciplinarity (Mäyrä 2008) where methods and theoretical influences are less limited by narrow sets of historical norms. The ability to step outside of certain constricting historical ways of seeing games enabled the field to give greater respect to a topic that historically was often seen through the lens of simplistic moral condemnation and panic (Karlsen 2015). Game studies has a long history of understanding broader engaging phenomenon including general human play (Lambrow 2021), performativity (Dicecco & Lane 2014), describing itself through broad terms such as the "ludosphere" in culture (Stenros & Kultima 2018). Partying is an essential phenomenon to include in such a ludosphere. It is a phenomenon that appears fundamental

to human culture, it is perceived as playful, is widely beloved by those who do it, and yet is primarily studied for its risks. It is time for game studies, which engaged in past theoretical consolidations on terms such as games (Arojoranta 2019; Stenros 2017), play (Sicart 2014; Stenros 2015) and playfulness (Masek & Stenros 2021) to begin the beneficial theoretical work of defining the term partying. Past studies have used highly culturally bounded situations where partying occurs to define the phenomenon such "drinking" or "nightlife". It is critical to create an understanding of this phenomenon that is not exclusively at night and while drinking alcohol, but rather understands the structure of the situation on a deeper level. This is highly similar to how games across culture are greatly influenced by their contexts and norms yet are also connected to each other and benefit from a games-oriented discourse. Given the scope and complexity of this phenomenon it furthermore would benefit future work to create a field of "party studies" to build on findings and create an informed discourse on the topic.

Partying is an essential phenomenon to not just look at theoretically, but also in practice. Parties share several deep similarities to games: they are a seemingly inefficient use of resources and full of arbitrary rules and rituals. They promote fictional 'as if' spaces where normal social expectations change. They frequently create positive experiences, that are pursued by specific communities of engagement. Parties can be people's favorite times of the year, a way of maintaining family connections, and re-framing potentially stressful transitions in cultural roles. Through repetition, parties seem to have a cultural-creation role as well. Parties repeated over years and decades, establish engaging activities that become customs. These engaging customs reinforce emotionally and socially satisfying components of being a society member at large. Individuals seek to create excellent versions of these parties for others, bringing new members into cultural ways of connecting to others. This playful method of cultural social-formation and reinforcement should be studied further and treated with respect far beyond a simplistic lens of how parties are associated with certain risks. In this way, this work stands as a full-throated argument that parties are understudied, misunderstood by most of the past empirical work that address them, and game studies is the right field to study them further.

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