

Party of Two at a Fraternity Party!

Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*

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Party of Two at a Fraternity Party! Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*

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Abstract

For the emerging field of party studies in game studies, this paper offers one account of how looking at boundaries of play as they are maintained in situ can be meaningful for understanding play and partying in practice, beyond a theoretical phenomenon. The paper is based on a duoethnography conducted by the two authors through playing *Fallout 76* as fieldwork together between December 2021 and April 2022. The aim of this paper is to explore how the situated boundaries of co-play impacted our experiences of duoethnography within the game as well as to discuss how these boundaries connect to our intersectional identities. We explored how spatial, game design and temporal boundaries shaped our gameplay. However, we were also impacted by our intersectional identities, as we are both cisgender, white academics of middle class background, although with varying backgrounds in terms of gender (cis woman and cis man), family status (childfree and father of two), and different academic status. As such, through restorying and reconceptualization, we critically discuss our experiences in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries are not taken for granted and thereby maintained without reflection.

Keywords

Ethnography; duoethnography; play; co-play; *Fallout* series

I entered a fraternity house in Morgantown to discover the remnants of a party so wild that it... killed people? I wonder if I can find some clue about what happened here. (Entry from the quest 'Wasted on Nukashine', *Fallout 76*)

Digital play includes actors, artifacts such as computers and chairs, sites such as forums and communication platforms, networks, and policies, all of which shape play in different ways. In this paper, we exemplify the complexities and boundaries of co-play through a duoethnographic exploration (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) of *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). The notion of *party* is present on multiple levels in this paper: the party quest 'Wasted on Nukashie' is discussed here to both give the reader an understanding of the gameplay of *Fallout 76*, but also to exemplify a party within a game. Additionally, we discuss a situated experience of what co-play can look like for a 'party of two', as games often use 'party' rather than 'team' to refer to a group of players. While our play sessions were not positioned as 'parties' when we did the field work, the party quest design facilitated an experience which was 'party-like'. As we will explore further, due to the relaxed pace and low skill required, the experience of the quest was more similar to playing party games than the otherwise 'hardcore' game experience of the *Fallout* series (1997–2018).

Further, as there are situations where partying in the same physical space is not possible, such as the 'Zoom parties' of the COVID-19 pandemic (Holm, 2021) or due to living in different parts of the world, we argue that parties can take place online as well, especially as Masek and Stenros (2024) include game nights in their definition of parties. As exemplified by Fisher, Chen and Taylor (2025), autobiographic perspectives can be highly useful for understanding 'partying in practice', especially so in contexts that are shaped by power asymmetry (which also was the case here). Thereby, we offer one account of how looking at boundaries of co-play as they are maintained *in situ* can be meaningful for an understanding of 'partying in practice' and beyond a theoretical phenomenon, as advocated by Masek and Stenros (2024).

Fallout 76 (Bethesda Softworks, 2018) is the digital multiplayer game we engaged with and it is here understood as part of shaping our shared gameplay and analyzed as such. The *Fallout* game series "provides a critical assessment of our world, both past and present, and portrays the aftermath of nuclear war" (Reid & Downing, 2018, p. 52). The fraternity party quest we engaged with exemplifies a shared play session within the game, with its combination of tongue-in-cheek humor and societal criticism. Playing online multiplayer games has many similarities to ethnographic fieldwork, for example a stance of inquiry, engagement, and reflection. Neither play nor ethnographic fieldwork consists of clearly bounded spaces but are rather "results from a complex mix of actors and sites knit together in deeply contextual ways" (T. L. Taylor, 2022, p. 40). In other words, the aim of this paper is to explore how the situated boundaries of co-play impacted our experiences of duoethnography within *Fallout 76*, as well as to discuss how these boundaries connect to our intersectional identities.

Boundaries are here seen as active rather than static, as dynamic and to be questioned rather than taken as unchangeable facts (N. Taylor, 2024, in turn informed by C. L. R. James). Inspired by Nicholas Taylor's book *Grounds of Gaming* (2024), we discuss how boundaries shaped our interactions within the game as well as how

these are boundaries are connected to our intersectional identities. Aligning with the autoethnographic tradition in games studies (see, e.g., Fisher et al., 2025; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012; Wilde, 2023), we use our embodied game experiences as a starting point and analyze moments of friction during fieldwork. Some of these we clearly identified as such already in ‘the field’ (such as the player outstaying their welcome in Fredrik’s camp, see section ‘Game Design Boundaries of Co-Play’), whereas others were briefly noted in the field notes and we started untangling the friction in the process of writing this paper (such as neither of us questioning that it would be Fredrik’s timetable that primarily impacted when we played, see section ‘Temporal Boundaries of Co-Play’). We then turned to N. Taylor’s (2024) dynamic boundaries, and in the case of temporal boundaries, also to Sharma’s (2014) discussion on temporal normativity, to better understand the larger patterns which impacted our situated co-play. As highlighted by N. Taylor (2024), boundaries highlight both the inclusion and exclusion of play, and boundaries can be used to maintain the inequalities within gaming cultures. Play extends beyond any particular place, as:

the boundaries that define contemporary sites of play are productive of a host of interconnected sets of relations, including gender and racial difference; economic privilege and exploitation ... and the increasing capture of communicative practices and social belonging by the extracting and sorting apparatuses of platformization. (N. Taylor, 2024, p. 203)

Additionally, not only space, but also time is political and shaped by power relations, but so is time (Sharma, 2014). As such, we discuss how spatial, game design and temporal boundaries, related to our intersectional identities, impacted our co-play experience of *Fallout 76*. While we focus on one at a time in the section Boundaries of co-playing *Fallout 76* we do not suggest that boundaries fall into neat categories as they often overlap, and the organization of three subchapters is for the sake of paper readability. Finally, through restorying and reconceptualization (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we critically discuss our experiences in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries are not taken for granted and thereby maintained without reflection.

Fallout 76

Fallout is a successful game series with *Fallout 76* (2018) as the latest title. The series takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States, following the fictional Sino–American war and nuclear holocaust of 2077. This alternate US timeline follows the Second World War, when the world at large is faced with nuclear power in the wake of the atomic bombs (Inscoe, 2021). In line with the previous titles *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010) and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), the player can explore an open post-apocalyptic world where the United States is torn by nuclear warfare. The game mechanics align

with real-time shooters (both first- and third-person), but with additional roleplaying elements. Each game in the series has its own narrative but all take place in the same coherent universe (McClancy, 2018). Leino (2015, p. 174) describes *Fallout: New Vegas* as having “a creamy middle” (referring to the concept by Aarseth, 2012) where “all players go through the same events in the beginning, make their own ways through the relatively open world, and upon completion of the right tasks, end up in one of the numerous, but pre-defined ending sequences”, and both *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4* follow the same pattern.

Furthermore, *Fallout* as a game series is shaped by nostalgia through a ‘retro-futuristic’ style with clear influences from 1950s United States in terms of decor, weapons, music, in-game menus as well as quests. This era is associated with a more innocent and happier time, although only for a limited group of people: those included in a nationalistic, white, heteronormative and middle-class society (McClancy, 2018). This is also reflected in the track list played on the Diamond City Radio (the ‘default’ radio channel within the game) with gendered and sexualized 1950s hits, resulting in a “United States ambiance” (Inscoe, 2021). However, these themes being embedded in both the visual and the auditory landscape can also be seen as a societal commentary. Mosberg Iversen (2012, p. 1) points out that the “whole series invokes issues such as consumer culture, corporate power, propaganda, racism, and what it means to be human”, which becomes extra poignant given that the ruined game world status. Interestingly enough, the post-apocalyptic world state can also create openings for playfulness or a “perverse kind of relief”—in a time shaped by fear of an impending apocalypse on the horizon “worries may be laid to rest, and desires long repressed can be indulged when there is no longer a future to be considered” (Condis, 2017, p. 188).

Unlike its predecessors, *Fallout 76* is an online multiplayer game, and the player will explore, or, as presented by the game, reclaim, post-apocalyptic Appalachia together with other players. As such, *Fallout 76* is the first game in the series to offer player-to-player interaction and not only player-to-game interaction (Mo & Kim, 2019). So far, *Fallout 76* has not received the same academic interest and discussion as its predecessors (see, e.g., Inscoe, 2021; Leino, 2015; McClancy, 2018; Morrisette, 2020; Mosberg Iversen, 2012). There was a mixed reception upon launch, primarily focused on the lack of dialogue (Mo & Kim, 2019) as well as narrative in the game: “*Fallout 76* exists as a stripped-down version of prior *Fallout* games, a digital ruin to wander through but without purpose” (Wills, 2018, p. 1). Although, some argue that the game has, in part, redeemed itself since (Mäntylä, 2021), partially due to non-player characters (NPCs) included later. As the latest installment in an often-referenced videogame series, we argue that empirical insights from *Fallout 76* have relevance in the academic discussion on online game culture.

Duoethnography

We have previously employed interviews and screen recordings conducted by the participants *in situ* for research on in-game identities (see, e.g., Rusk & Ståhl, 2020, 2022; Ståhl, 2021; Ståhl & Rusk, 2020). Although these data sources provide a rigorous participant's perspective, our understanding remains fragmented, since there are sites, contexts and actors that affect the participant's gaming that is beyond our reach using these data sources. As such, researching our own gameplay allows us additional access in a manner that few participants might be willing or comfortable to provide. The accounts given here are still fragmented and situational (as all ethnographies are), but by using our own experiences, we hope to provide insights into the complex, relational and embodied experiences of co-playing a digital game. Accordingly, we conducted a duoethnography, informed by previous ethnographies, (Haddow, 2022; T. L. Taylor, 2022) autoethnographies (e.g., Wilde, 2023) in-game and other relevant contexts. The fieldwork was inspired by the twin-ethnographies of Sundén and Sveningsson (2012), however, unlike their in-game experiences (different guilds in the same game) our in-game experiences are shared and shaped by us co-playing the quests and exploring the game together. Researcher positionality and reflexivity in relation to the researched context is essential in all ethnographic work (see, e.g., Bucerius, 2013; Haddow, 2022). However, when the research context is the researchers themselves, these discussions need even further emphasis. The intention behind this work is to exemplify relevant boundaries of co-playing through our own situated experiences (Taylor, 2024), which align with Sundén's (2012, p. 170) description of autoethnography, where the researcher becomes the subject of research through "connecting the personal with the cultural, the social, and the political" as well as the technological. As such, this paper additionally provides insight into how autoethnographic material can be highly meaningful for understanding 'partying in practice', especially in contexts shaped by power asymmetry (Fisher et al., 2025).

Central for duoethnography is conversations that center around *restorying* and *re-conceptualization* (Cummins & Brannon, 2022; Gibbons & Gibbons, 2016; Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019; Mair & Frew, 2018) and where duoethnographers expect not to "reify previously held beliefs but to generate changes to old stories" (Sawyer & Norries, 2012, p. 94). We co-play *Fallout 76* while communicating over voice chat, document said gameplay through individual fieldnotes (both perspectives) and screen recordings (Matilda's perspective). We use the datasets for stimulated recall (Pitkänen, 2015) during a recorded dual interview (both perspectives). While our (co)constructed discussion is the core of the dissemination through this paper, the fieldnotes and the documented gameplay allowed us to revisit our shared and individual processes and narratives (Sveningsson, 2012).

In practical terms, the in-game fieldwork took place between December 2021 and April 2022, and mostly during the in-game season called 'Zorbo's Revenge'. Our in-game fieldwork took place in our respective homes, generally playing between 9 and

11 PM. Both had previously played *Fallout 4* and, in addition, Fredrik had played *Fallout 3*. Only Matilda had played *Fallout 76* prior to the fieldwork. Once this venture started, we had known each other for several years and already considered each other friends and colleagues. While we had talked about games on numerous occasions, including the *Fallout* games, we had not played any games together before this. We were both playing *Fallout 76* on an Xbox One and thereby used the voice chat application offered by the console to communicate in-game. Both have played on console prior to this, but had mostly played singleplayer games. Furthermore, both of our game setups were located in a shared space within our respective homes, an aspect we will return to later in this paper. Co-observed family members have not been mentioned here by name out of respect for their privacy, despite having the misfortune of being parent or partner to one of the researchers, respectively.

While the in-game activities took place in 2021–2022, the restorying and reconceptualization continuously occur as we work with this material. We discussed the gendered aspects of co-playing in detail in a previous chapter (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025), and this paper is another step of reconceptualizing our experiences. A first draft of this paper was presented at the ‘2023 Spring Seminar: Party!’, arranged by the Game Research Lab at Tampere University, Finland. As an initial step to frame this fieldwork within party studies, we were then discussing our experiences on three inductive levels: becoming a party, being a party and then ending the party, perspectives that were later included in the analysis although they are no longer explicit categories (see section ‘Boundaries of Co-Playing *Fallout 76*’). As we revised this initial draft, we included the theoretical layers of boundaries, mainly informed by N. Taylor (2024) and Sharma (2014), and the connection to party studies through the paper by Masek and Stenros (2024). As this writing process was done in parallel with a paper focusing specifically on gendered aspects of our co-play (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025), the scope of this paper is broader, and provides additional perspectives to the previous paper, specifically the discussion on temporality. While notes on both hardware and software are included in our fieldnotes, throughout the analysis we saw that the game design choices of *Fallout 76* were the most salient in our co-play experiences and, in this context, the most meaningful analytical perspective. As such, the revised version of this paper has a narrower focus which is also reflected in our terminology: ‘game design boundaries of co-play’ (rather than technical boundaries of play as presented by N. Taylor, 2024). Throughout the process, Matilda has been leading the analysis, which has then been shared with Fredrik and the various drafts have been revised as we restoried and reconceptualized our experiences. As such, for the sake of reader transparency of the analysis process, all quotes are dated.

Death at the fraternity party

With few enemies present and following more of a murder mystery logic than the average quest, the fraternity party quest slightly stands out from other *Fallout 76* content. The *Fallout* series in general has a dark sense of humor (Mosberg Iversen, 2012) and environmental storytelling is central. As players, we are encouraged to explore what happened at the fraternity house (PI KAPPA MU) and why all students are dead. We were browsing the quests we had available, and after some consideration, Matilda suggested we play this quest as “it would be suitably challenging” (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022) for getting back in the game after a longer break. Additionally, she found it to be “on theme” as Fredrik “had been at Levi [the largest ski resort in Finland] with a group of guys” (partying and skiing). While she had not finished all available quests, Matilda had prior experience of the game, and thereby an understanding of what quests and areas were more challenging than others.

The environmental storytelling is front and center in this quest and the party context sets a somewhat lighthearted tone despite dead students. On the ground floor where we enter the fraternity house, there are multiple references that we associate with a stereotypical North American frat party: kegs, empty bottles, multiple forms of alcoholic beverages as well as red plastic cups used for playing beer pong (see Figure 1). The only enemies we face are ‘radroaches’ (radiated cockroaches), which is one of the enemy types considered to be the easiest to deal with. At our level at the time (26 and 25 respectively), these are more of a nuisance than actually dangerous and can be eliminated through a single bash with the butt of one’s gun.



Figure 1. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda’s perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

While exploring the area to solve the quest (“Investigate what the partygoers were drinking”), we discussed what we saw over voice chat. In the upstairs bedrooms, there are clothes available with the University logo on them. Matilda asked if Fredrik had seen the skeleton in bed with a mannequin (see Figure 2) upon seeing which Fredrik joked “this one has a garden gnome in the bed... seems like a good party” (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022). After a while, we find a bottle of ‘Vintage Nukashine’, a fermented drink including nuclear material, which we are encouraged to drink. For two in-game minutes, we experienced the effects of the drink, which is changing the color scheme to black and white with an at times sepia tint as well as a number of ‘party crashers’ (zombie-like partygoers that technically are still alive although their minds have been destroyed by radiation damage and are thereby feral, known as ‘feral ghouls’ in the *Fallout* series) to spawn in the basement. These party crashers are easy to defeat as they do not charge at us but shift from side to side where they are standing. Once the two minutes are up, there is a loading screen with a scene from the quest and a comment stating that “Half of the fun with Nukashine is that you never know what crazy places it will take you” (see Figure 3). This corresponds with the writings of Nichols (1993, p. 537) on student culture and partying: “Intoxication is not a condition towards which one moves in the course of partying, according to these narratives, but a necessary condition to begin”, framing the ‘perfect buzz’ as elusive.

After that, Matilda ‘wakes up’ in the southeast corner of the map, which can be considered one of the most dangerous areas in the game. Fredrik is nowhere to be seen, waking up in a completely different location on the map. Next to Matilda is a



Figure 2. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda’s perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

table where two skeletons and two garden gnomes are seated, with pre-war money and an axe strewn around the table. The quest encourages the player to read the label of the Nukashine bottle, which provides the player with a riddle that points the player back to Morgantown and the partygoers' alma mater. Following the steps of the riddle, we found ourselves in a tattoo parlor where a Nuka-Cola machine covers a false door to a speak-easy that serves Nukashine. In a backroom, the players can interact with Biv, a drink-testing robobrain,¹ and eventually learn how to make Nukashine themselves.

The low difficulty of the quest is similar to the low skill level required and "spirit of levity" associated with party games (Nguyen, 2019, p. 1). For example, Matilda finds a locked footlocker which requires the lowest level of skill to pick. While picking the lock, she hears the noise of Fredrik fighting feral ghouls. She pauses picking the lock but notes that Fredrik should be able to take care of them and resumes with her lockpicking. As neither the enemies nor the lockpicking are particularly difficult, these activities do not take away from the spirit of levity. Further, while zombielike, the behavior of the feral ghouls in this quest (shifting from side to side rather than charging at the player, perhaps to emulate drunken dancing) are intentionally designed in line with a more lighthearted quest. Despite being surrounded by death, this quest has little in common with horror games where the player "often has access to limited resources in the face of manifold threats" and thereby kept on their toes (Schnaars, 2019, p. 78). Similarly, the partygoers having been dead for quite some time, the low sense of urgency and skill required encourages more leisurely exploration, more in line with the rules of a party game (Nguyen, 2019; Stenros &



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda's perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

Montola, 2024) than the otherwise ‘hardcore’ *Fallout* games do in general. Here, play and ethnography clearly overlap (T. L. Taylor, 2022) as we intentionally chose to play this ‘party game quest’ when we wanted less of a challenge after a break in playing the game, where the design of the quest in combination with the party theme encouraged a spirit of levity in our own gameplay.

Boundaries of co-playing *Fallout 76*

In the following subsections we will discuss spatial, game design and temporal boundaries of play, and how these shaped our co-play experience and interaction. We are here echoing N. Taylor (2024, p. 209, he in turn informed by C. L. R. James) who views boundaries as “dynamic, material-discursive interventions into the world that ought to be problematized rather than accepted as fact”. As mentioned in the introduction, we do not suggest that the boundaries fall into three neat categories, as they often overlap. Through restorying and reconceptualization (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we discuss our experiences from a different perspectives and in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries shaping our play are not automatically maintained and taken for granted.

Spatial boundaries of co-play

While ours is ‘a party of two’, there are also other people present both in-game (which we will return to in the following subsection) and out of it. As we co-play *Fallout 76* on console, their open placement in our respective homes allows full insight into the content on display for anyone present on either end. In his discussion about the physical location of gaming devices and their setup in domestic settings, N. Taylor (2024) describes three types: the hearth, the cabinet and the bunker. The hearth is comfortable: it signals that the gaming device is placed in a position similar to that of the fireplace: in a shared family space and with wires tucked away out of sight. As there are usually multiple seating slots, the space is also used by other family members, occasionally at the same time as gameplay occurs. The purpose of the setup is to create “bonding, shared narratives and experiences” (N. Taylor, 2025, p. 87). We see also connections between the hearth and more traditional forms of co-play: in the form of shared screen play (SSP), which according to the historical analysis by Karhulahti and Grabarczyk (2021), was once both a profitable and desirable design, yet is no longer the preferred way of co-play. The bunker game setup is defensive and maintaining traditional (gender) roles and values, it is for individual use, with no wire management and in general, in an unkempt space. The cabinet is also set up for individual use but curatorial: with wires kept neatly out of sight and centered around displaying and curating media through artifacts signaling “gaming, geekdom and fandom”, resulting in “cabinets of curiosity” in a neat space (N. Taylor, 2024, pp. 82–83). In both cases, at the time of fieldwork both our setups could be described as hearths, and the space was also used by other people at

the time. As such, our gameplay can be understood as shared beyond our interactions with each other: it was also shared with those present in or passing through the physical spaces we occupy.

In her fieldnotes, Matilda (2 February 2022) reflects on views into the game:

On the other hand, the soundscape is partially closed, partially opened. It is only me and Fridde [Fredrik's nickname] that can hear the entire conversation. On the other hand, I can't see what he sees and vice versa. No one both sees and hears everything.

This partial view offers insight into the other person's home, such as Fredrik pointing out that "sharing is caring" when listening to Matilda and her partner at the time banter about whose chips she is currently eating from (26 February 2022), when Fredrik steps away from the game briefly to admire the snow castle his daughter had built (21 January 2022) and lets the dogs out into the backyard (25 December 2021). However, the voice chat opening a door to the other person's home can also result in our microphones picking up other voices in the same space. Fredrik noted that Matilda's partner at the time, who was playing *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) in another part of the room, was giving response cries to said gameplay which was picked up by Matilda's microphone. Matilda addressed some of these response cries, but not all. Engaging with the people we lived with could also result in confusion as in terms of who one is talking to. For example, Matilda had noted the following situation in her field notes (12 January 2022):

Fredrik: *mumbles*
Matilda: what?
Fredrik: now I am talking to [wife's name]
Matilda: ah okay
Fredrik: and now I am talking to you

Thereby, our game setups being located in a shared physical space ('hearths' as per N. Taylor, 2024) shaped our co-play in various ways. Our gameplay was shared with those we lived with, but it was also interrupted by things outside of the game world and our interactions, despite attempts by family members at both ends so as not to disturb our play, which in turn limited their activities. Placing our game setups in a less public location of our respective homes would have resulted in causing less confusion and interruption between ourselves but closing us off from our families. Having the device physically placed in a shared location can facilitate transparency, and thereby, also function as a form of parental control and monitoring (Harvey, 2015). Further, it would have cleared the shared spaces for other activities without the need to listen to our conversations while playing. However, being able to dedicate a space for gaming purposes only is a privileged position to be in, requiring the financial opportunity to do so. Further, the participants in Harvey's interview study (2015) on play in a domestic setting, some families reported that simply having a

gaming setup in a shared space which facilitates local co-play does not mean that family play automatically happens.

Game design boundaries of co-play

In the following section, we will discuss some examples of how the game design and associated boundaries impacted our experience of co-play. *Fallout 76* can only be played on public servers with a maximum of 24 players, a design feature which directly impacted our co-play as we would have preferred to co-play on a private server had that been possible. The game currently offers both voice chat and, added more recently, text chat. However, for reasons unknown to us (whether voice chat was not available on console at the time of the field work or the feature was well hidden and needed to be turned on manually), we were convinced that players could only interact with each other through a number of emotes. We thereby used the software provided by Xbox for voice chat in parallel with the game. As we had mostly played singleplayer games before this, we also both invested in new hardware (new headsets) to facilitate a smoother voice chat experience. Using different software for voice chat shaped an interesting scenario when Fredrik was thrown out of the game. As we had just cleared a raider camp from enemies when this happened, Matilda was idling around the camp, playing the banjo and waiting for Fredrik to return, continuously talking with him as the voice chat was separate from the game. As she stayed there longer than intended by the game through the respawn timer, the raiders respawned around her pixel by pixel, and Fredrik then rejoined the game mid-fight (we have discussed the gendered aspects of Fredrik logging back on in time to 'save' Matilda elsewhere, see Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). During this fight, Fredrik was killed by a raider and Matilda rushed to save him by using a stimpak. However, as we were not part of the same team anymore as neither of us had had time to send an invite during the fight, Matilda was not able to do so. We have not been able to confirm whether that is still the case, but at the time, the game not allowing players to help non-team members creates clear in-game boundaries for co-play.

Apart from our tiny party and enemies of various kinds, there are also friendly NPCs and other players roaming about in Appalachia. We did on occasion discuss the different dialogue options available for interacting with an NPC, such as whether or not Fredrik should 'waste' a stimpak to help an NPC (field notes 23 March 2022). However, we often end up skipping these dialogues as it is difficult to talk with each other in the external voice chat at the same time as the NPC dialogue audio is playing. *Fallout 76* does not offer the player to adjust the audio specifically for dialogues, perhaps due to the game not having any NPCs originally but added those with the 2020 'Wastelanders' update. While skipping NPC dialogue is not something Matilda would do if she was playing by herself, she found herself overwhelmed trying to listen to both the NPC and Fredrik at the same time.

We did also encounter other players in-game, however, these meetings were mostly unremarkable. One of the more memorable ones was a player dressed as Santa

Claus dropping us both a communist attire as a gift before they continued on their journey. In her field notes (2 February 2022), Matilda noted that since we started playing together, no one had offered to play in a team with her: “Three is a crowd? ... That might be because two players are perceived to already have company. On the other hand, it can also be seen as I am already ‘claimed’ [by a man]?”. We continue the discussion on these phenomena and how co-playing *Fallout 76* can be understood as gendered in more depth elsewhere (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). Coincidentally, of the most memorable interactions we had with other players happened the same session as we played the party quest (20 February 2022, see subchapter Death at the fraternity party). As we were about to wrap up our session for the day, a random player (level 6) emerged in Fredrik’s camp. At first Fredrik greeted them and invited them to trade, however, eventually, the player overstayed their welcome both in terms of time and getting too familiar with what we considered a personal space within the game. Fredrik fired a few warning shots, the player threw a bomb at him and left, but fell off a cliff and died from fall damage. We thought that would be the end of it, but the player respawned and refused to leave the camp. While the player was using one of his workbenches, Fredrik put up walls all around them (referred to by Fredrik as ‘Fortnite-ing’² the player). Having listened to Fredrik’s growing frustration, at this point Matilda left her camp to witness this incident with her own eyes. As we were tinkering with Fredrik’s camp decorations, a new player emerges (about level 500). They showed an ‘angry emote’, the ‘haha’ emote, fired at Matilda and the camp and then displayed the compass emote, meaning ‘follow’. They repeat this interaction a few times, presumably to show that they are not happy with the lower-level player being trapped. We discussed that the low-level player should know that players’ camps are considered sacred “especially if they have friends that are level 500 and something” and questioned why the player did not simply fast travel to the Vault 76 (the only fast travel option which is free apart from one’s own and ally camps) to escape as it was only a short walk away from Fredrik’s camp. The situation ended with Fredrik leaving the game, his camp vanished and the player eventually left the area as well.

It is clear that this player oversteps what we perceived as *normative play* in this context (Harper, 2013): respecting other players by not overextending their welcome in someone’s camp. However, in his field notes, Fredrik also noted that his main frustration was not at the player, but at the game, as we thought that the game did not offer a clear way to communicate and show one’s intentions, including a clear way to communicate “gtfo”³ (20 February 2022). The game has no technical limitation to visiting another player’s camp, using their equipment or sleeping in their bed. While destroying someone’s property is punished by the game, invading someone’s

² ‘Fortnite-ing’ here refers to the practice of building walls around another player to trap them and then eliminate them in *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017).

³ GTFO is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “internet slang initialism that stands for ‘get the f**k out.’ It functions as a forceful dismissal, ordering someone to leave a conversation, space, or online forum” (Merriam-Webster, 2026).

privacy through crashing their safe haven is not. Similarly, the player can choose not to engage in player-versus-player (PVP) play and thereby not be harmed by other players' shots unless they shoot back (the Pacifist Mode). However, as Matilda experienced in an occurrence before our fieldwork, the game does not stop anyone from invading the personal space of one's avatar (see Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). One of the most infamous examples of this is teabagging, "a controversial practice where the player's avatar repeatedly crouches over a defeated player's 'body' in order to simulate rubbing his or her genitals over the avatar's body" (Myers, 2019, p. 765). As noted by Stenros and Montola (2024), creating formal rules that forbid teabagging is difficult to enforce as the experiences of the action are contextually situated and more about etiquette and the social rules of the game. As a consequence, it is difficult for players who view the teabagging as a mediated form of sexual harassment to avoid playing with players who see it as a bit of harmless fun.

From our perspective, a quick visit from a stranger could be tolerated, but they should not outstay their welcome. This was a form of respect we also show each other: we primarily did stick to building our individual camps and occasionally visit the other person's camp, but in some cases, we have also created shared camps with our respective small shacks. However, as we in hindsight consult online discussions on visiting other players' camps,⁴ we note that the consensus appears to be that players are welcome visitors in other players camps, are allowed to help themselves to things in unlocked containers and utilize workbenches and so on available in the camp as long as they otherwise leave it the way they found it. As such, it appears that our embodied experiences of what is considered respectful behavior for personal space are contextual, and our stance might be different from the norm of *Fallout 76* community at large. One reason for this might be that it was a new game to Fredrik and neither of us had engaged with online forums, etc., as part of our *Fallout 76* play experience. It might also be culturally situated, as a preference for rigorous personal space is deeply embedded in Finnish culture, with both of us living in a relatively small town at the time of the fieldwork and in a country which is allegedly the most sparsely populated country in Europe. Taken together, the visit in Fredrik's camp shows how the game design has set boundaries towards certain kinds of harmful behavior (players taking damage from shots and property getting destroyed), but allows players to disrespect other players in certain ways (shooting at them, teabagging and invading their safe haven) as formal rules against these are more difficult to enforce. As there appears to be varying opinions among players on what is socially acceptable in-game, there is a need for tools for solving conflicts (Stenros and Montola, 2024). As Fredrik noted, the use of emotes in *Fallout 76* does not offer a meaningful way to solve a conflict or communicate when a player is crossing one's boundaries. While we later realized that voice chat might have been utilized to potentially solve this conflict, the conflict would not have occurred in the first place if the game had offered playing on private servers.

⁴ See, for example, 'Fallout 76 Guide - Unwritten Rules: Wasteland' by MrMorp (2024).

Temporal boundaries of co-play

Before playing the party quest, we had had a several week-long breaks from playing *Fallout 76* together. Matilda commented on this (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022): “Back to *Fallout*! I had been playing *State of Decay* before, so it took me a while to find the flow. Especially with the longer break”. As mentioned earlier, our play sessions mostly took place between 9 and 11 PM. Our session often ended when there was a ‘break’ of some kind, such as us finishing a quest or milestone within a quest, going back to our camps after exploring, or dying somewhere in the wilderness. However, there were also situations where we ended a session because a certain element of the game malfunctioned and we no longer had the patience to try to find a solution. There were also times when we simply got tired: “we got quieter there at the end ... partially because my social capital was running low” (Matilda’s fieldnotes, 14 January 2022). Unfortunately, we were less thorough in documenting the situations when we stopped playing than when we started to do so. While this is understandable given the time of the day, this is something we note as worthy of further exploration in future ethnographic studies of shared play.

As such, we wish to highlight that leaving the party and *not* playing together is also part of the co-playing experience. For example, during Matilda’s first solo play session after we started playing together, she felt very lonely. After doing “some slightly sad shuffling around ... on my lonesome”, Matilda witnessed a radstorm over a lake, realized the humor of her moping and sent a photo of said radstorm to Fredrik as a WhatsApp message (16 December 2021). During another solo session, she had reorganized things in their joined building project in her camp. Fredrik asked if he did not have a cooking station anymore, upon which Matilda replied that she moved it. As a reply, Fredrik jokingly pretended to be hurt about this upon Matilda replied, “that is what happens when you do not join me” (19 January 2022). While we use humor to negotiate these situations, both instances suggest a certain level of disappointment in not playing together. In her fieldnotes, Matilda (13 January 2022) noted that she “played *Subnautica* and saw that Fredrik’s username logged in. We had not agreed to play that night, but I felt that I wanted to show that I get him wanting to play alone/other games. So I texted him a comment about *Subnautica*”. Accordingly, questions of how to end a session would be fruitful to do further empirical research on, but also on not playing games together: especially to explore what the expectations are if one commits to playing together and how these are managed. In other words, how ongoing consent to play (see, e.g., Stenros & Montola, 2024) is negotiated in situ during co-play is a meaningful perspective for party studies as well as game studies at large.

Our usual time slot (9–11PM) was set in line with Fredrik’s family life with two children and their hobbies, plus housework and two dogs, shaping our co-play schedule. As we both lived in Finland at the time of the field work, we did not have to take time zone differences into account, which could have added an additional layer of complexity in scheduling the co-play. On 21 January 2022, we played in the morning

for a change. Our fieldnotes showed that we were highly aware of the change of pace: Matilda noted that her partner at the time was at work and Fredrik commented that he did not need to be careful not waking anyone up while talking. However, just as we were about to get started, Matilda had to take a quick break for a phone call and reflected that “that doesn’t happen when one plays in the evening”. Before our co-play could start in the evening, Fredrik put the children to bed before we could get started. This timeslot was also used for checking on his and managing their family schedule. Furthermore, once play started, he had to be mindful not to wake any sleeping family members when playing the game, because of the console being adjacent to his daughter’s bedroom (fieldnotes, 21 January 2022). In comparison, Matilda lived in an adult ‘gamer household’ where there was more allocated time for playing various games. However, co-play also takes organization and at times sacrifice for Matilda, as it is largely Fredrik’s schedule which dictated co-play scheduling. For example, Matilda noted shifting from “a super exciting place in *Subnautica*. Tell me, what don’t I do for research?” (fieldnotes, 19 January 2022), taking a break from watching a television series with her partner at the time (fieldnotes, 8 January 2022), and life in general impacting play “I told [previous partner’s name] that if we don’t start playing now, I simply will not have the energy to play anymore tonight” (fieldnotes, 12 January 2022). However, when working on this analysis (26 August 2025), Fredrik noted that Matilda “is/was more comfortable with staying up late” and that he felt “like a wimp who always said that it was time for bed”, highlighting that we had different views on how late it is acceptable to stay up playing, especially on a weekday.

As a result, both of us expected Matilda, as a child-free person, to adapt to Fredrik’s schedule, as her time was understood as more flexible. Her time as an adult, child-free person and chosen spare time activities (spending time with her partner, watching a television show, playing whatever game she preferred at the time, etc.) was understood by us to be of a lower priority, despite both of us having work, housework and partners to fit into our daily time puzzles. While a person without children to take care of in general presumably has more hours of the day to utilize as they wish (as seen in the previous discussion of Matilda having time to play the game on her own), Matilda is also limited by the temporal normativity of nine-to-five rhythm of work and society (Sharma, 2014). Matilda being junior in comparison to Fredrik in terms of age and academic seniority (research assistant and doctoral researcher when we first met, currently postdoctoral researcher and associate professor) presumably also segmented this, at the time of the fieldwork, taken-for-granted temporal boundary.

Access to game technology is shaped by the gendering of time: in the case of some of Harvey’s (2015, p. 127) participants, prioritizing time for play is not something ‘good mothers’ and ‘normal girls’ would engage in. Gender therefore also plays a role here, as Matilda was expected to be understanding and flexible towards Fredrik, the one of us living a more ‘normal’ life, dictating our shared play timetable. As a child-free woman, a group facing societal stigma for their life choice in general (see, e.g.,

Suhariyati, Rahmawati & Ubudiyah, 2025) and by prioritizing time for play, and thereby engaging in non-normative behavior as a woman (Harvey, 2015), it is not surprising that, apart from some comments in Matilda's fieldnotes, this is a practice we did not question at the time. To be clear, we are not saying that Fredrik should have neglected taking care of his family or that our shared gameplay should create an additional burden for his wife. In a discussion on the gendered labor arrangements around gaming, N. Taylor (2024) uses the bleak example of *Fortnite* streamer Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins. Ninja is the face the audience sees, while his wife, Jessica Blevins, supports him behind the scenes by taking care of phone calls, emails, their home and dogs. Additionally, we wish to stress that it is not a unique phenomenon for our shared gameplay as we have experienced the same assumption of playing together with other parents (dads) as well.

Informed by Pierre Bourdieu, Sharma (2014, p. 74) highlights how time and power are related, and how in ethnography, behaviors connected with utilizing power over others' time should be noted and analyzed. Through the restorying and reconceptualization which is central in dueoethnography (see, e.g., Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we emphasize that the timeframe of co-play and how that is managed is valuable to analyze and we are here using our own experience to exemplify why it might be highly fruitful. How the timeframe for shared play is decided and on what grounds it is based, how the individual players are affected by this and, finally, what how the people not part of the party are impacted, are all relevant analytical questions.

Discussion

A reader unfamiliar with the *Fallout* series might find it bizarre referring to a quest engulfed with the skeletons of dead students, radiated feral humans haunting the premise and a perpetually drunk sentient-brain-robot-cyborg as a 'fun pastime'. However, *Fallout* is a game world where science experiments with questionable to nonexistent ethics (see for example Gomez, 2026 on Vault-Tec vaults) are numerous and likewise are companies stopping at nothing when it comes to push their revenue. After all, it is a game series infused by "hope, satire, tragedy", intentionally designed to raise questions about societal issues such as consumer culture and corporate power (Mosberg Iversen, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, while we exemplified gameplay in *Fallout 76* through one particular quest for this paper, it needs to be understood in relation to the game and game series as a whole. While the party goers did not die of natural causes, there are no obvious signs of blood in the frat house. Unlike the slow motion V.A.T.S.⁵ kills used in *Fallout 4* and *76*, there is limited gore and use of 'aestheticized blood' splatters (Schnaars, 2019) in this quest. In this capacity, especially in comparison to quests centered around solving the mystery behind unnatural deaths in other RPGs, this quest stands out. Take for example the

⁵ "V.A.T.S. (Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) is a visually dynamic, stat-based combat system in *Fallout 3*, *Fallout: New Vegas*, *Fallout 4* and *Fallout 76*" ('VATS', n.d.).

serial killer in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) creating bizarre displays of human body parts behind and the search for the person behind missing women in Kirkwall, eventually including both blood rituals and necromancy in *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare, 2011). Taken together, the difficulty level of the enemies and other mechanics, such as the lockpicking, aligns with the spirit of levity (Ngyuen, 2019) of party games, perhaps to facilitate a pause from the heavy, sinister and dark themes otherwise highly present in the game, as a way to lay our worries to rest for a while (Condis, 2017).

However, given that 50s and its associated aesthetics represent a happier time for a certain demographic—nationalistic, white, heteronormative and middle-class society (McClancy, 2018)—one can also question for whom this quest is considered a refuge. We end up asking ourselves: do we appreciate the party quest because we can ‘afford’ to take a break from the dire future presented in the game series? While we are not US-based and endeavor to break free from heteronormativity, we are both cisgender, white and middle class. In addition to having resources like hardware for playing games, we also have the privilege of time to play games (even if it is, as discussed earlier, limited) and take trips for leisure as mentioned in passing in the fieldnotes. While frat party culture is not the same in our national context, we still have enough understanding of the concept to see the humor in the quest. Furthermore, as white, able-bodied and coming from a certain socioeconomic background, we would presumably be welcome at a party of this kind. In other words, we can ‘afford’ to party.

For the budding field of ‘party studies’, we wish to highlight the relevance of looking at boundaries of partying and play as they are maintained *in situ*. Based on the experiences discussed here, we see that connections between time and power (Sharma, 2014) and how ongoing consent to play is negotiated (Stenros & Montola, 2024) would be particularly meaningful lenses for the field of party studies. We see ethnographic (duoethnographic or otherwise) approaches focusing on partying and co-play as it happens as fruitful ways to understand parties beyond a theoretical phenomenon, in practice (Masek & Stenros, 2024). Despite the frat party quest itself being designed to offer a break from the main gameplay loop and the overall bleak narrative of the *Fallout* series, the game design boundaries we faced did not always facilitate meaningful and respectful co-play. Limited opportunities for communication as well as team status and inventory management impacting our ability to help each other encourage resource-hungry playstyles, in line with the gameworld being a frontier.

The final boundary that we wish to highlight relates to the “boundaries in academic knowledge production” (N. Taylor 2024, p. 203). We found that playing *Fallout 76* together for research became something between work and play: there was a lot of joking around, and we covered many non-work-related topics while playing. Yet, at the same time, all activities were understood through the lens of fieldwork and things that might be relevant to document in one’s fieldnotes. On the one hand,

researching our own gameplay allowed us access in a manner that few participants would be willing or comfortable to provide, for example insights into questions of spatial boundaries within domestic settings. After all, as noted by Harvey (2015, p. 138), the domestic “sphere and its regulations and activities can be a powerful and productive space for the perpetuation of intersecting discourses regarding normative technological subjects constituted through the materiality of banal, everyday practices”.

On the other hand, considering the other person a friend has to some extent censored what we wrote in our fieldnotes, knowing we would eventually share them with each other. Here we see the strength in the restorying and reconceptualization (see, e.g., Sawyer & Norris, 2012): we can revisit the fieldwork through a critical lens, together. The resulting texts (like this and Ståhl & Rusk, 2025) do not share entirely flattering views of us, yet display accounts that highlight our situated boundaries of play and our positions of privilege within them. While our play took place outside of office hours and off-campus, academic power dynamics, expectations to ‘publish or perish’ (see, e.g., Butler & Spoelstra, 2020), as well as the power of speed (Sharma, 2015, p. 72)—that is the notion of ‘being busy’ seen as something admirable—our play did not happen in vacuum outside of societal norms and values. As such, temporal boundaries is a fruitful lens for looking at both co-play and partying, here exemplified with both of us taking certain temporal boundaries for granted. However, it requires a multilayered and intersectional discussion which might not always be comfortable. Fredrik noted as part of writing this paper (26 August 2025), that despite our best efforts of respecting the other, it is easy “to end up in different camps” (in this case metaphorically, however, as established, also in different in-game camps). As such, we see that openly discussing, listening to each other and then setting our own shared boundaries of co-play within the party is to be encouraged.

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Both authors have done work following four criteria (see below), however, as Ståhl has done more substantial contributions to all and is the corresponding author, she is the lead author.

- Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Final approval of the version to be published (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved (Ståhl & Rusk).

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