

Getting High in a Hi-Tech Setting Narrative Structure and Archetypical Partygoers in the Mass Effect 3 DLC Citadel Mission: ‘Party’

Tim Timvig

 [0009-0006-8390-4137](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8390-4137)

Department of Education, Umeå University, Sweden

tim.timvig@umu.se

Carl-Erik Engqvist

 [0000-0002-5318-1269](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5318-1269)

Humlab, Umeå University, Sweden

Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture

Volume 17, issue 1: Party Studies in Game Studies (2026), pp. 33–60

Getting High in a Hi-Tech Setting

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TIM TIMVIG*  0009-0006-8390-4137, tim.timvig@umu.se

CARL-ERIK ENGVIST†  0000-0002-5318-1269

* Department of Education, Umeå University, Sweden

† Humlab, Umeå University, Sweden

Abstract

This study engages with representations of partying in singleplayer sci-fi games by taking the *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012a) DLC *Citadel* (BioWare, 2012b) mission ‘Party’ as its case. Through a theoretical lens based on previous notions of partying and play forms – chiefly the theory of game rubrics by Roger Caillois (1958/2001) and the three-act structure of drama by Syd Field (1979/2005) – the structure of the party, and the roles and functions of the characters present there, are analysed to understand the possibilities and limitations of participating in partying. The findings are presented as a timestamped graph of the three acts of the in-game party, along with descriptions of eleven identified festive archetypes. The study concludes that the Cailloisian concepts are apt for analysing parties as narratological and gamelike phenomena, and that the complexity of fun preferences should be taken seriously in forthcoming party research.

Keywords

Partying; games; Roger Caillois; three-act structure; *Mass Effect*; sci-fi; archetypes

A party is a collective event among like-minded individuals. It requires teamwork and an understanding of group dynamics. (EDI, *Mass Effect 3*)

In their clarion call for game studies to include party studies as a subfield within the former, Masek and Stenros (2024) have offered a tripartite taxonomy of parties, distinguished by their respective purposes: parties connecting strangers, parties reinforcing connections within family and friend groups, and parties reinforcing

connections within society. Yet, as the authors note, the literature is scarce regarding how partying is understood as a playful activity. In this article, we contribute to the emerging body of work on partying as a subdivision within game studies by offering a visualisation of the dramaturgical structure of parties and a burgeoning typology of partygoers. To mend the dearth of party research within game studies, we set out to analyse a microcosmos within a microcosmos in the hope of sparking interest in further studying the nature and characteristics of representations of parties from a narratological and ludic perspective. This, we trust, will be beneficial for understanding the omnipresent forms of leisure in our forthcoming ludic century (cf. Zimmerman, 2015).

Despite the advantageous effects of partying, recent studies suggest that partying has decreased in post-pandemic society, especially among young people (Törrönen et al., 2019). Oftentimes, research on partying has focused on the negative impact of the phenomenon – and the resulting moral panic attributed to it (Masek & Stenros, 2024). Today, however, a reversed moral panic might be dreaded. Instead of socialising, young adults engage in *sofalisising* (Tosuntaş et al., 2020), and a decrease in alcohol consumption has been tied to increased social media usage (Luomanen & Alasuutari, 2022; Törrönen et al., 2021), leading to shifting drinking patterns and practices (Caluzzi et al., 2024). Thus, young people risk missing out on the power inherent in partying, namely, the ability to reaffirm friendships and expand one's network of friends (Demant & Østergaard, 2007). Alarmingly, various editorials speak of an ongoing 'loneliness epidemic' following the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic (eClinicalMedicine, 2023; Ng, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Thus, the culturally reproduced literacy needed to throw and attend a successful party to connect with friends and society at large risks becoming rusty. This warrants more research on parties as phenomena, to understand the norms and mechanisms dictating successful parties, lest we risk bringing up a generation unsynchronised with its own species. As noted by Masek and Stenros (2024), a boring party is a failed party – but little research exists on how to achieve fun at a party. More research is thus needed regarding the genre, structure, and components of a successful party.

The central aim in Masek and Stenros's (2024) study was to understand how participants see parties as connected to playfulness, relying on previous studies that likewise identify connections between play and other activities (such as between play and group sex; see Harviainen & Frank, 2018). To understand how partying can be further qualified as a form of play, as well as to note how notions of playfulness in in-game settings are represented, in turn, we have chosen to return to Roger Caillois's (1958/2001) notions of play to consolidate a rigorous theoretical framework apt for analysing our empirical data. In doing so, we set out to capture the nature of partying through a Cailloisian understanding of games and play, returning to his concepts of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, along with different approaches to rules.

As our object of study, we chose the singleplayer science fiction game *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012a), specifically the downloadable content (DLC) *Citadel* (BioWare, 2012b), containing a fictional party. *Mass Effect 3* is part of a videogame series lauded for reflecting the whole of society (Zekany, 2016), and subjected to ample player-based research due to its impact on its players and its devoted fanbase (Burgess & Jones, 2018; Dutton et al., 2011; Krobová et al., 2015; Murzyn & Valgaeren, 2016). The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2013) has sold approximately 14 million copies worldwide. *Mass Effect 3* is the most popular of those, with seven million copies sold (D'Angelo, 2012; Radić, 2021). The *Mass Effect* games are praised for their narrative, worldbuilding, characters, voice acting, and emphasis on player choice (Wojnar, 2021). Arguably, many players have been exposed to the game's worldview. Additionally, the subreddit r/masseffect displays plenty of fan-based praise for the party within the DLC. Consequently, it is reasonable to believe that the party reflects a strong sentiment among the players, as the fanbase feels deeply connected to its representation. They may thus regard the representation of the party as an example of a real-life party – one of the few instances of leisure time presented in the game, in contrast to the otherwise serious narrative.

Aims and research questions

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to study the representation of the party in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* and to examine the usefulness of Cailloisian terminology for interpreting the narrative structure and the playful experiences of a party represented in a digital game. Second, it aims to understand how archetypical partygoers are represented in the party. This is done to show the complexity of parties as ludic phenomena, from the standpoint that people enjoy them differently. To guide our analysis, we have engaged with the following research questions:

1. How can the representation of the party in-game be understood narratologically?
2. What playful role and ludic function do the characters have at the fictional party?

The setting

The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2013) is a series of sci-fi, action roleplaying, singleplayer games developed by BioWare. The games' narrative focuses heavily on player decisions significantly impacting the story, the state of the game world, and nonplayer character relationships across all three titles, resulting in multiple possible play experiences (Zakowski, 2014), as well as individually driven approaches to history (Marino Carvalho, 2015) and even religion (Irizarry & Irizarry, 2014).

The trilogy takes place in a futuristic Milky Way galaxy where various intelligent alien species coexist under an interstellar political alliance centred on the Citadel, a space

station and symbol of galactic civilization (Mass Effect Wiki, n.d.). Humanity is relatively new to this stage, having recently discovered faster-than-light travel through antique alien technology known as mass relays. Players take on the role of Commander Shepard, and from the start, they can customise Shepard's sex, appearance, backstory, psychological profile, and first name. Shepard is an elite human soldier tasked with protecting the galaxy from threats and uncovering secrets hidden in its ancient history. The emerging narrative explores themes of cooperation, war, identity, bigotry, synthetic life, and the legacy of earlier civilizations, all the while allowing players to guide moral and tactical decisions.

The narrative game mechanics in Mass Effect

What makes the *Mass Effect* games narratively interesting is how they present the relationships between the protagonist Shepard and their squadmates. These companions are one of the trilogy's defining strengths, serving as combat allies but also as narrative lenses and emotional anchors. Each game features a diverse team of alien and human characters who join Shepard for political, personal, or purely ideological reasons. To deepen the relationship between Commander Shepard and these companions, the player can: (1) talk to them between missions aboard the Commander's ship, Normandy; (2) complete loyalty missions, which are personal side quests that explore their backstories and unlock combat bonuses upon success; and (3) romance certain companions, experiencing evolving relationships with returning characters throughout the game trilogy.

Each companion serves as a portal into a culture, theme, or conflict in the galaxy, personalising and contextualising the galactic politics, ideologies, and historical grudges. Companions often react to the player's choices, challenge their worldviews, or support their goals. Some disagree with the player's choices, whether on moral or political grounds, making them feel like fully realised characters rather than easily controlled pawns (cf. Jørgensen, 2010). Through optional conversations, the player can develop empathy and even intimacy with each companion, which enriches the narrative stakes, especially when threats put these characters in danger. This empathic relationship creates a powerful narrative effect and investment in the games (Lankoski, 212). Further, rather than relying on codex entries or exposition, the galaxy comes alive through their perspectives, where they both serve the plot and become the plot – defined by game developer Lee Sheldon (2004, pp. 42–43) as *pivotal characters*, a role usually reserved for the protagonist or antagonist. Through these supporting characters, the game engages with notions of multiculturalism – arguably to reinforce American imperial logics as beneficial (Patterson, 2015) or to present a future solution to postcolonial legacies through multicultural universalism common in the space opera genre (Callahan, 2019; Hayden, 2017). However, although there are a variety of characters, including LGBTQ ones, these are justified only through systems of efficiency, militarism, and nationalism; in essence, as useful assets and expendable when not (Youngblood, 2018).

Description of Mass Effect 3: Citadel and the ‘Party’ mission

The analysed party is found in the *Citadel* DLC, the final DLC pack for *Mass Effect 3*. It has the following description on Electronic Arts’ homepage: “Commander Shepard and the Normandy crew get a much-deserved break, but their shore leave is short-lived. Face down a new villain before catching up with old friends from Mass Effect 1 and 2” (BioWare, 2013).

The DLC gives the player new adventures, areas, and attractions on the space station Citadel, and the option to connect with some of the series’ non-player characters, including companions, and to have a party. The party can thus, in Masek and Stenros’s (2024) terms, be labelled a party connecting friends and family. As such, the party portrayed is reminiscent of a typical house party (cf. Demant & Østergaard, 2007). Moreover, the party in *Mass Effect* follows the traditional three-act structure outlined by Syd Field (1979/2005, pp. 13–14) in his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, with ascending and descending actions and a few climaxes. As noted by Morisset (2014), the *Mass Effect* games challenge the Aristotelian stipulation that narratives be structured around a beginning, a middle, and an end, as players can influence the storytelling. However, the player does not have any agency to influence the general outcome of the party, following in line with the function of limited agency in the game series itself, as noted by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012), as well as by Burgess and Jones (2018) regarding the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy (see Reardon et al., 2017).

As an optional event in the game, the party remains relevant to players who invest time and emotions in the fictional characters, as the game’s characters, like other fictional characters, are scripted to elicit the same empathic responses as real individuals do (cf. Lankoski, 2012; Morrison & Ziemke, 2005).

Method, material, and delimitations

For this study, we based our analysis on a walkthrough of the relaxed version of the party, provided by the YouTube channel Zevik (2014). Our analysis is a theory-driven close reading of the dialogues in the recording, along with observations of the actions in the narrative (see Appendix 1). Although notions of hypermasculinity, female sexualisation, disability, or queerness in the *Mass Effect* series have been noted by previous research (Blythe Adams, 2015; Jerreat-Poole, 2020; Krampe, 2018; Lavigne, 2015; Lima, 2023; Winter, 2022; Youngblood, 2018), we do not focus on the representations of the social background variables of the characters in this study. For the dramatic structure of the party, gender, extraterrestrial race, or rank are deemed irrelevant to the essence of the encounter or the gamelike situation in question – although social background variables are frequently ascribed meaning in real gamelike situations (cf. Goffman, 1961/2013, p. 29).

Theory: Caillois's rubric of play forms

To strengthen the logical ties between game studies and party studies, we draw on a theoretical framework informed by prior work on play forms. In this study, we thus engage with Roger Caillois's (1958/2001) fundamental rubric, in which analogue games can be analysed according to their ability to create fun through competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), make-believe (*mimicry*), and vertigo (*ilinx*). Our case, a representation of a party played out in a video game, might thus come off as a counterpoint to the Cailloisian game rubric. However, as Carbone et al. (2017) note, contemporary games – videogames – ought not to be squeezed into the shape sorter provided by Caillois's pre-videoludic rubric. Rather, the Cailloisian perspective on play, society, and agency should be used to analyse the social premises under which present video games exist. This, they mean, is cognate with Caillois's embracing of contradictory and unattainable notions of reality. Moreover, McDonald (2020) argues that the Cailloisian subdivision of play into four forms was arbitrary and non-empirical, and that this position opens new ways to discover fundamental types of games and play – an act which, in itself, would also constitute a form of play. In this article, we have sought to elaborate the Cailloisian rubric by adding newer modifications to his theory to our analytical framework.

Our first modification stems from Masek's (2023) introduction of two new concepts to the Cailloisian duality of *paidia* (rulelessness) and *ludus* (ruleness), namely, *līlā* and *muhō*: creating and changing rules as a form of play, and violating rules as a form of play, respectively. Importantly, all four ways of engaging with rules can be present in the same experience, overlapping with one another. Another configuration of the duality of play has been suggested by Lauwaert et al. (2007), namely, the addition of the concepts of *repens* (surprise) and *repositio* (forced retry), to compensate for the neglect of temporal and dynamic structures of games. To make a game enjoyable, they argue, a game must achieve balance between its game elements and the game experience, as too much *repens* or *repositio* kills the fun of playing the game. The proper balance between the concepts, on the other hand, "gives players the delight of mastering a complex, new task" (Lauwaert et al., 2007, p. 103). Although relevant to the analysis of games in general, these two concepts were tricky to operationalise for our present data (which depict a party rather than a party game as such). Thus, we had to exclude them from our analysis.

Our second modification stems from McDonald's (2020, p. 863) interpretation of Caillois's definition of play as the pure form of an "experience of uncertainty that draws its content from elsewhere". In our interpretation, play (the experience of uncertainty in a safe space) is understood as deriving its content from a game (sources catering to various desires). These desires include the "drive to compete, to submit passively, to become other, and to destroy one's own equilibrium" (McDonald, 2020, p. 869). In other words, the elements of *paidia*, *ludus*, *līlā*, and *muhō* are summoned through the grimoires of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* – sometimes intersectably (see Figure 1). As noted by Rogers (1982), games offer total experiences

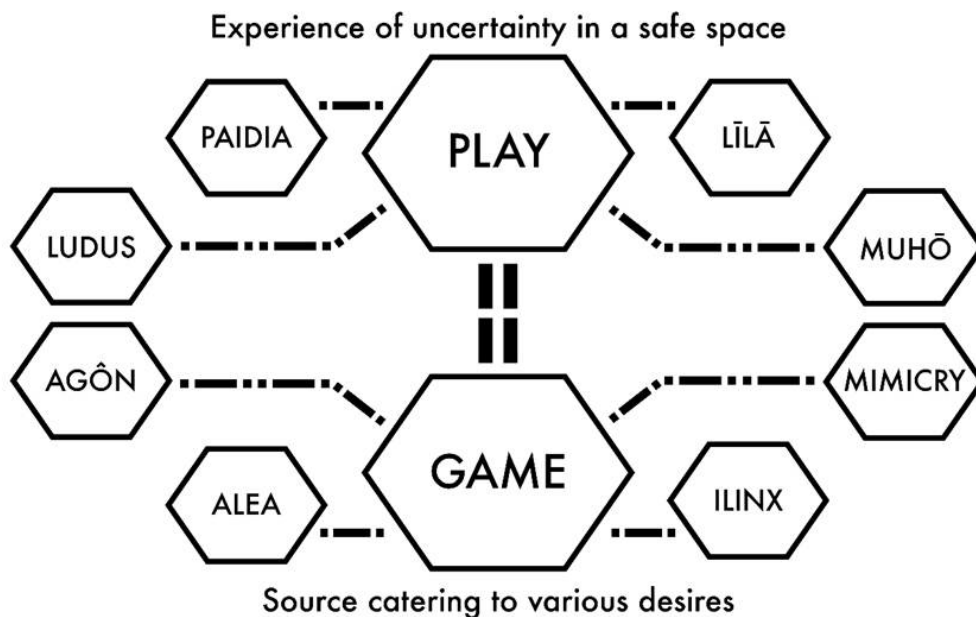


Figure 1. The relation between play (as experience) and game (as object), as understood in this study.

that are hard to classify in any rigid matrix, as they are interconnected. However, despite being interconnected, we still perceive the parts as essentially different. Remaining too rigid, thus, would not enable any analysis in the end. Furthermore, similar intersecting analyses of play forms and games have been carried out, for instance, by Ottens (2016), who utilises the Cailloisian fourfold rubric to analyse a *Lord of the Rings* boardgame, observing how the four play forms intersect.

Partying and playfulness: Inviting Caillois to the party

Applying Caillois's concepts to other disciplines has been successfully done before. For instance, Wilhelmsson (2008) has shown the potential in applying the Cailloisian rubric to understand narratives as games or games as narratives. Both games and narratives are free, separated from everyday life and limited in time and space, uncertain (in the sense that the nature of a narrative or game cannot be determined beforehand), unproductive (in terms of material wealth), regulated by rules, and fictional (in the sense that narratives and games require a suspension of disbelief to be enjoyed).

Similarly, there are clear connections between the Cailloisian play forms and the act of partying, as hinted in Masek and Stenros's (2024) descriptions. The party-as-ritual seems cognate with both *mimicry* and *ilinx*, in the sense that costumes (*mimicry*) and the consumption of inhibition-reducing drugs along with dancing (*ilinx*), are common across various parties. In all three forms of partying, "games", "game play experiences", and "game playing" feature as ways to facilitate social interaction or reinforce

social connection, respectively. Although Masek and Stenros (2024) do not specify the general genre of these games, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that these games are of a competitive or chance-based nature. Moreover, the authors argue that the bulk of previous research on partying treats parties as sites where legal restrictions are challenged, thereby risking a rhetoric in which partying “should be seen as somehow unacceptable or forbidden by society” (2024, p. 78). This conception of partying aligns with the Cailloisian concept of *ilinx* – the panic, chaos, and destruction of established order as the source of fun and excitement. In their conclusion, Masek and Stenros defend their identified similarities between parties and games through an argument which echoes the definition of games by Caillois (1958/2001, pp. 9–10), namely, as something free and joy-inducing, as something separate from ordinary life, as something arbitrary and thus void of strict determinability, as something unproductive, as something rule-bound, and as something based on make-believe. Parties, much like games, 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” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 90), and “succeeding at making a socially connecting party is often seen as a playful experience itself” (2024, p. 87). In other words, setting out to establish the pre-imagined definition of a successful party – acting it out, as it were – becomes an act of *mimicry* in itself. Furthermore, as “numerous individuals measured the success or failure of parties” in their empirical data (2024, p. 88), it might be argued that parties are seen as competition (or, indeed, chance) against a hypothetical adversary, in the sense that the host can either succeed or fail – win or lose – in their pursuit of hosting a party. The same can be said about the partygoer, who might have something at stake – winning the heart of a potential bed mate against a handful of other suitors (*agôn*), or hoping to have a good time despite the general uncertainty of any alcohol-induced gathering under the tyranny of an unknown seating chart (*alea*).

One possible incompatibility between play and partying concerns the Cailloisian criterion of unproductivity. Unlike games of competition which – when taken too seriously – risk resulting in a sundering of a social entity, parties are generally “goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 88), and the phenomenon of highly playful partying is an act “that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity” (2024, p. 87). Obviously, this notion of partying as inherently goal-oriented does not quite align with Caillois’s definition of play as free and unproductive. In their Marxist reading of Caillois’s work, Kristensen and Wilhelmsson (2017, p. 392) interpret Caillois’s definition of play as something “voluntary” as follows: “all except play is depriving man from being man and the free will to play lies at the essence of man as a social being, making man completely man”. In addition, the players of games must “remain amateurs to reach this paradise” of Caillois’s (Kristensen & Wilhelmsson, 2017, p. 396), wherein real and dream are mixed, rather than play being an accumulation of capital, in the capitalist sense. In

Masek and Stenros's (2024) notion of partying, however, a clear goal-orientation towards succeeding with a party seems to contradict the notion of play as unproductive (unless, of course, the goal-orientation of a party must be understood as autotelic, in the sense that the – mostly social – capital accrued when hosting a party or attending one is only relevant in the separated and fictional space of said party). For this study alone, we have not engaged with how the party might influence the out-of-party context in the *Mass Effect* story. Thus, we safely conclude that, for the sake of the party as something separate from ordinary life, the freedom and unproductivity criteria remain intact within partying, despite the goal-oriented pursuit of connecting people or reinforcing connections between them.

Operationalisation: Games and rules

In this study, we rely on Caillois's (1958/2001) four play forms – *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* – along with Masek's (2023) elaboration on the Cailloisian rule terms *paidia* and *ludus* and the addition of the Masekian rule terms *lilā* and *muhō* to analyse the party in the *Mass Effect 3* Citadel DLC. For the reader's benefit, we have operationalised the terminology to add rigour to our analysis (see Table 1).

Ludic term	Caillois's/Masek's definition	Operationalisation	Examples at a party/among practitioners
AGÔN	Games of competition. Relates to merit.	Engaging in explicit competition or declaring a will to compete against fellow partygoers, for instance, by taunting or comparing.	Playing beer pong at a party (<i>agôn</i> + <i>ilinx</i>).
ALEA	Games of chance. Relates to heredity.	Engaging in games based on chance or deriving fun at the party from that which cannot be controlled or expected beforehand.	Playing poker at a party (<i>agôn</i> + <i>alea</i>).
MIMICRY	Games of make-believe. Relates to masking.	Dressing up for the party or engaging in charades or deriving fun from being out of one's usual character.	Dressing up for the best outfit (<i>agôn</i> + <i>mimicry</i>).
ILINX	Games of vertigo. Relates to trance.	Engaging in mind-altering activities or declaring a will to create chaos at the party.	Drinking wine while wearing a toga (<i>ilinx</i> + <i>mimicry</i>).
PAIDIA	Play as an act freed from rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from activities at the party, where there are no rules.	Experimental artists, children.

LUDUS	Play as an act bound by rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from activities where the rules of the party are respected.	Lawyers, dice-based role-players.
LĪLĀ	Play as an act of making rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from altering the rules at the party or creating new rules.	Politicians, gamemasters.
MUHŌ	Play as an act of breaking rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from breaking the rules at the party.	Jesters, online trolls.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the ludic terms used in the analysis of the DLC party.

Analysis

First, we present our analysis of the three-act structure of the party based on our operationalisation of the Cailloisian concepts (see Figure 2). Then, we present a typology of partygoers using the same terminology.

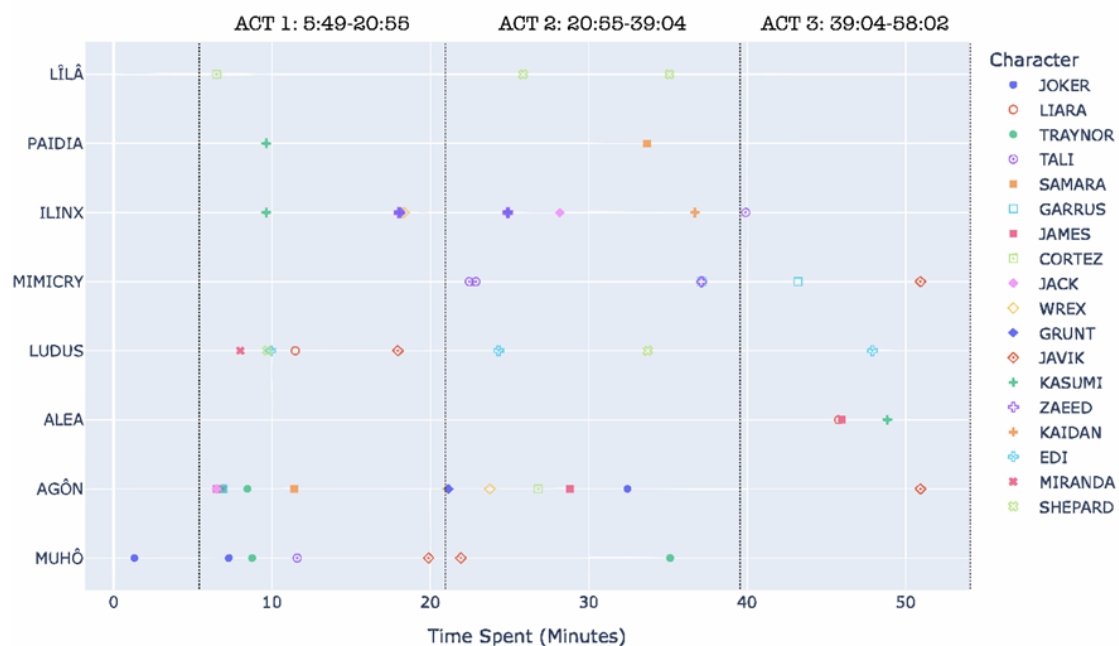


Figure 2. Timeline of game characters' actions categorised through the Cailloisian/Masekian concepts, divided into three acts.

The three-act structure of the party

Prologue

After the mission ‘Citadel: Retake the Normandy’, the pilot of Shepard’s ship, Joker, suggests that the protagonist throw a party in their apartment to celebrate the mission’s success, offering the player the option to either follow suit or cancel. To get the party started, Shepard must pick up party supplies in the nearby commercial district and then decide whom to invite from a guest list. Some of the nonplayer characters are invited by default, while others, including squadmates, are optional invites. Understandably, only squadmates who survived the three games and finished parts of their story arcs can be invited. As a disclaimer, not all characters were available in the walkthrough we chose to analyse.

Act I: In search of conflict

When the invites go out, the AI character Glyph asks the protagonist what type of party they want: quiet or energetic. These choices will set the initial dialogue in the first part of the party, but not the different groups formed during the party, which are determined by the guest list. Depending on the number and types of guests, up to four groups form during the party – each with different dialogues between the characters, placement, and events, while the squadmate Kasumi, if available, will move between groups. As noted earlier, we have focused solely on the quiet version of the party in this analysis.

In the first act, we note a clear over-representation of *agôn*, *muhō*, *ludus*, and *ilinx*, with only one instance each of *lilā* and *paidia*. The over-representation of *agôn* stems from the competitive banter among the non-player characters, many of whom have military backgrounds. An example of this is the conversation between Jack and James, seated on a sofa and discussing the subject of tattoos, where they clearly enjoy comparing their military exploits (Appendix, 06:30–06:42). During the same instance, another example of *agôn* occurs in the kitchen, where Traynor, Liara, Garrus, and Tali engage in icebreaking by commenting on the size of Shepard’s apartment, and how expensive it must be (Appendix, 06:54–07:06). The characters add their own suggestions for alternative projects on which the money could have been spent – a conversation which resembles the art of whining, as the characters playfully compete in providing better suggestions.

Instances of *muhō* occur in relation to instances of *ludus*, as can be seen in how Joker engages in a narrative attempt at breaking decorum, producing a *faux pas*: “I’d make Cerberus popular. Big propaganda campaign, like I was running for president. Fundraising dinner, shaking hands, kissing babes” (Appendix, 07:16). Miranda comments on his utterance by correcting his phrasing – “I think the expression you want is kissing babies” (Appendix, 08:80) – thus offering a return to a rule-bound and adequate way of communication. Joker continues his *muhōesque* critique of the Cerberus project, to which his love interest EDI responds with a *ludusian* remark, “Do

you remember that I am also a Cerberus project?" (Appendix, 09:56), leaving Joker feeling presumably ashamed of his negative exposé. An instance of *paidia* is also put in relation to *ludus*, as Kasumi shows up out of nowhere, childishly interrupting a conversation on which she has been presumably eavesdropping all along, to which Shepard declares the impertinence of said gesture.

Finally, the first act contains an instance of *ludus* versus *ilinx*, wherein Javik proclaims that his chauvinistic race only participated in parties where they "considered the future and respected the dead", that is, where rules were observed and where logic-based activities were cherished (Appendix, 17:57). Zaeed, Grunt, and Wrex each voice their distaste for *ludus*, preferring fun based on *ilinx* – to which Javik responds with a *faux pas*, questioning the whole point of the party and thus breaking the decorum of the same:

Zaeed: Sounds boring.

Grunt: There's usually more yelling and cursing at any gatherings I go to.

Wrex: Get a bunch of Krogan together, and things always get fun and probably broken.

Javik: 50,000 years from now, no one will remember this party. What is the point? (Appendix, 18:02–18:53)

In conclusion, the first act seems to hinge on tension: the characters need to break the ice and feel comfortable in their new surroundings. Interestingly, this involves summoning play forms that break the stiffness of the situation. Competing, taunting, or playfully bantering with other partygoers may satisfy the need for conflict and getting the party going. This also relates to the sensation of boredom visible towards the ends of the first act, where certain characters express a lust for chaos. In essence, the first act of the party quickly moves from stiffness to increased dynamics and an ascension of action.

Act II: Burning one's candles at both ends

In the second act of the party, a clear over-representation of examples of *agôn*, *ilinx*, and *mimicry* occurs, along with two instances of *ludus*, *līlā*, and *muhō*, and one single instance of *paidia*. A good example of *agôn* is the dialogue between the Krogans Wrex and Grunt, where the younger Krogan tries to challenge the veteran Wrex to drink more:

Wrex: Drink!

Grunt: I'm drinking, but it's not a drinking game.

Wrex: Afraid to lose?

Grunt: Nothing to do with fear. I know I'll lose. (Appendix, 21:06–21:30)

The same aliens are represented in a notable instance of *ilinx* where they engage in a dialogue with the protagonist, by repeating the surname Shepard in different humorous ways, clearly making fun of their commander with the intent of creating communicative chaos. A clear example of *mimicry* is the Quarian (alien) character Tali and her attempt to mimic a spaceship using her body language and making sounds like an engine: “You have to imagine my arms are the wings” (Appendix, 22:27–22:52).

Examining the occurrences of *ludus*, *lilā*, and *muhō*, a few instances can be mentioned in detail. As an example of *ludus*, the AI EDI finds pleasure by observing the disorganised activities inherent in the structure of the party: “I am observing displays of complex social entropy, so yes, I am having a good time” (Appendix, 24:18). The host, Shepard, follows the behaviour of *lilā* by asking the alien Javik to go easy on the drinks: “Sure, uh you might want to tap the brakes a little” (Appendix, 25:50). The alien Javik, in turn, breaks the social rules according to *muhō* by clearly wishing to touch a female character in his drunken arousal. Seated at the bar desk, he explicitly remarks: “I would like to touch you” (Appendix, 21:55), laughing at her reaction and the absurdity of his own remark.

In conclusion, the second act seems to be based on social entropy (as aptly stated by EDI): consuming alcoholic beverages, as committed by Wrex, Grunt, Tali, and Javik, leads to the removal of personal inhibition. Wrex and Grunt, having taunted each other to become intoxicated, engage in mind-bending play with their host, whereas Tali and Javik break decorum by voicing their present lust for intimate interaction. Consequently, the host is heard declaring various orders back to order, that is, establishing new rules and reminding the guests of culturally agreed codes. The second act of the party thus orbits around the theme of utmost energy; the characters are burning their candles at both ends, as it were, in their pursuit of festive exaltation.

Act III: Denouement

After talking to the character Glyph a third time, the player can choose to start the final phase of the party. In this case, the groups and interactions are determined by the theme of the second part, and the protagonist can only decide which group Glyph will appear with, for example, helping some characters make food in the kitchen or keeping an eye on others who are quarrelling. Regardless of the theme, the player can, after talking to all groups and listening to as much dialogue as they want, then go to the couch to gather the guests for a group photo. With a final camera move showing the photo later hanging on a wall, the scene fades to black, marking the end of the party.

A clear over-representation of *alea* and *mimicry* occurs in the final act of the party; *ilinx*, *ludus*, and *agôn* occur one time each. Engaging in *mimicry* are Garrus and Zaeed, playing around with the potential ways to improve the apartment by technical means – prospecting the herbarium and the bathroom, and discussing possible traps to install. In the previous act, the two characters have talked among themselves about the potential of the apartment, engaging in mind games about planning and picturing what could be done to their present surroundings. In the third act, the two characters – in their devoted illusion – split up into different parts of the apartment, communicating via comlinks, thereby furthering the illusion of their game of make-believe. Garrus remarks: “Ah, there are too many windows, and they’re... too big. Makes it easy for someone to track your movements, but it’s got potential. Be easy to set up a defensible position over there” (Appendix, 37:17).

In a separate room, Liara and James have retreated to play a game of poker (*alea*), with Javik serving as an observer. Kasumi later joins the game out of nowhere, smoothly setting up a hand of holographic cards – which further heightens and mirrors the *alea* nature of the activity: uncertainty functions as the key to fun in this instance.

Liara: You’re bluffing.

James: Don’t be so sure.

Kasumi (*appearing out of thin air*): Aw, be nice, Liara, you’re going to have your hands full with me anyway. (Appendix, 45:56–48:51)

Javik, comparing the game of poker to the games favoured by his own kin, engages in an act of *agôn*, warning the others of how ill they would fare: “Be glad we are not participating in one of the games from my cycle. You would all lose horribly” (Appendix, 48:46). Later, he admits having merely pulled a joke, deceiving the other partygoers at the poker table – thus deriving fun from *mimicry*: “I will never die of tricking the primitives, that is a game I enjoy playing” (Appendix, 50:51).

In conclusion, the third act seems to be based on a dwindling amount of energy or social inhibition, in the sense that the intoxicated guests have lost their spirits; for example, Tali is found in her drunk stupor on the bathroom floor, while Garrus and Zaeed, in their boredom, are succumbing to larping out their paranoia of a future attack on the apartment. In the process, they are messing with Shepard’s need to be a controlling host. Others are handling the dwindling party energy by either directing it towards games or preparing food in the kitchen (while keeping a small amount of banter going, for example, by arguing over the measurements of curry). The participants’ hunger-related conflict is thus eased and resolved.

Some guests, despite having a good time socially, still suffer from boredom, which risks putting the party at peril, as a failed party is a boring party (cf. Masek & Stenros, 2024). Some guests thus retreat to play poker in their desperate attempt to enjoy themselves while remaining physically present at the party, though not participating in the common activity. This means that the magic circle of the party (cf. Huizinga 1949/2016) is split into further magic circles within the greater one. The resolution of the party – which has suffered the sundering of the guests and the splitting of the same into various groups – is the group photo, wherein all the participants of the party are gathered; in a sense, putting the separate parties of the party into a sole party. Thus, the party fills its designated purpose: reconnecting comrades-in-arms.

The archetypal partygoers

Having detailed the dramatic structure of the party, we now turn to the characters present and, given their functions at the party, sketch their archetypal roles. Eleven festive archetypes have been found represented at the in-game party, and we present them in an arbitrary order.

Shepard, the ambulating host

The host archetype of the party, chiefly represented by the character Shepard, oversees the events and tries to steer the guests. Authorised to keep order, he routinely engages in actions wherein he derives pleasure from the elements of *ludus* and *līlā* by emboldening or inhibiting the guests. By telling certain guests to control their intake of mind-altering substances or by encouraging them to engage in conversation with the other guests rather than meditating for their own sake, the host dictates decorum and decides the decibel of the party.

Wrex and Grunt, the bombastic competitors

Wrex and Grunt, true to their nature as Krogans, an alien race of brutal but honourable warriors, regularly compare scars and battle stories, or challenge each other to friendly games, which for non-Krogans may seem quite violent. Thus, they fit the archetypal representation of the constant *agôn* competitors. Likewise, by referring to their ancestry or culture, they act out the concept of *ilinx*, as a true Krogan festivity means an unhealthy amount of chaos, destruction, and fighting.

Zaeed and Garrus, the creative potentialists

It is not surprising that Zaeed, the mercenary, and Garrus, a former Citadel security officer turned vigilante, who, in their professions, must regularly switch roles and adapt to new situations, are the ones who embody the concept of *mimicry* during the party. Perhaps they are so bored that they deem acceptable party behaviour to be speculating on a potential attack on the apartment and then acting out and implementing creative solutions that would create hell for any potential attackers.

Kasumi, the wild card trickster

Manifesting *paidia* and *ilinx*, the wild card trickster seeks to surprise the guests and disestablish order, routine, or general boredom by using her cloaking suit to appear and disappear out of nowhere suddenly, usually delivering a fun comment in the process. Yet, as must be noted, the wild card trickster does not engage in *muhō*, but rather in *paidia*: having a childlike manner, Kasumi disregards the rules without being rude or taunting the other guests or her host.

Liara, the odd card outcast

The token scholar of the group, Liara, is both an oddball and a powerful combatant. At the party, however, it is the former that shines. At one moment, she follows suit in the spirit of *agôn*, participating in a competitive comparison of the apartment; in the next moment, she leans towards *ludus*, and then she falls into *alea*. Regardless of the chosen concepts, there is always an element of social awkwardness in her attempt to navigate the party's dynamics.

Joker, the laid-back jester

True to his nickname – Joker – this character has no lack of entertaining comments that always challenge the social conventions of the moment. His very nature is soaked in the concept of *muhō*, which makes a player question whether the character is intentionally provocative or constantly letting his mouth run before his brain has caught up. Notably, however, he does not engage in competitive or vertigo-inducing activities but prefers to create tension by breaking decorum verbally.

Javik, the sarcastic party critic

Javik is a tragic figure: the lone survivor of his Protean race, he woke up from cryo-sleep 50,000 years later when all his kin were gone. He views the world with a certain aloofness stemming from being surrounded by what he views as 'primitives' and their backward cultures. From this point of origin, although his sarcastic comments fall into the categories of *muhō*, *agôn*, and *ludus*, they are there to remind the other party participants that he is not impressed with their version of celebrations and that things were much better, party-wise, when his empire controlled the galaxy. He derives his form of fun at the party by arrogantly distancing himself from its customs.

Tali, the intoxicated theatre monkey

Engaging in a combination of *ilinx* and *mimicry*, the intoxicated theatre monkey eagerly jumps at the opportunity to throw away the mask of their hypercorrect, technical, everyday self. Replacing it are playful reenactments of matters that may seem dull in the daily form, but in the eyes of Tali hold a certain magic she loves to portray. Unfortunately, when she discards her engineer self, there is also the sacrifice of constraint, which leads to disastrous results as she consumes too much alcohol, way too quickly.

Jack, the chaotic party crasher

Jack loves parties and thrives on conflict; that is clear from her utterances. She lacks boundaries and would be straight up in your face to smash it to bits if you metaphorically happened to step on her toes one day. Not only does she thrive on conflict, but she also usually initiates it with a combination of *agôn* and *ilinx*. As the party progresses, there is an escalating need for *ilinx*, a craving for action and destruction, even wishing to set things on fire, to satisfy that need.

EDI, the observant festive beginner

There is a first time for everything, and the festive beginner, the AI EDI, finds great pleasure in observing the spiral descent of the party, while still maintaining that it is all part of her preconceived clinical definition of a festivity. Perhaps predictably, as the machine she is, she is a pure manifestation of *ludus*. This is constant, regardless of whether she follows a recipe, making food for the hungry and intoxicated guest, or pointing out inconsistencies in her partner Joker's drunk remarks.

Kaidan, Cortez, and Jacob, the introverted wallflowers

Not much can be said about these three characters in the context of the party, besides the fact that they never stand at the centre of events but are instead content to fade into the background. Even Kaidan's *ilinx*-themed question – "Is it time to start dancing?" – is asked in a polite tone, not demanding anything of the host. The introverted wallflowers, thus, do not seem to participate in the party from any Cailloisian perspective on playfulness.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to study the in-game party in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* to analyse how Cailloisian terminology can be used as an applicable narrative model for the specific party event, and how archetypal partygoers are represented in the party. As we have shown, the Cailloisian terminology can be used to visualise, frame, and understand the representation of a party as a gamelike event. Turning to our first research question, regarding how the representation of the party in-game can be understood narratologically, we have noted that the party follows a three-act structure. Moreover, the party in-game is not only designed as three parts but also functions as a set of actions following the three-act structure, rising in intensity to the beginning of the third act, then descending, and culminating in the climax of the group photo. In other words, parties can potentially be understood as dramatic events.

Turning to our second research question, regarding the ludic role and function of the characters present at the party, we have identified eleven party archetypes, each aligning more often or seldom with the Cailloisian concepts. As other scholars have noted, the Cailloisian rubric cannot be taken as an absolute shape-sorter toy in which different games are to find their perfect place. Rather, the Cailloisian concepts

should be used to stimulate thought and sharpen the researcher's gaze when engaging with gamelike empirical data. Certainly, the Cailloisian concepts are broad enough to be applied to various forms of data, which risks leading to subjective interpretations of gamelike events rather than the comforting exactness afforded by the absolute exclusion of deviant data. However, we believe that the Cailloisian concepts for categorising play can illuminate characters and events in dramaturgic contexts, thus complementing more common narratological methods.

Discussing the represented party from a ludic perspective instead, we note that as a rule, games are based on rules – and so are parties. Masek and Stenros (2024, p. 78) note in their review of previous party studies literature that most empirical studies on partying “focus upon those who are breaking legal restrictions”. Interestingly, the party represented in *Mass Effect* likewise centres on the idea of breaking or adhering to the rules. Thus, in contrast to Masek and Stenros's (2024, p. 88) notion that “parties in general are goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience”, the representation of the party in *Mass Effect* seems to provide a contradicting set of playful experiences for each party archetype. The party thus becomes a multifarious, immersive place – a porous magic circle that allows itself to be altered by the partygoers into a blob without its silhouette breaking. The host, Shepard, is seen idling about, observing the partygoers and occasionally asking them to conform to his preconceptions of a proper party. The player of the game, thus, has limited agency, and the party lives its own life, as it were – much like any real-life party.

On a broader scale, the representation of the party challenges Caillois's (1958/2001, p. 87) idea of different cultures and their differing relations to the play forms. In his view, ‘rational’ cultures were characterised by *agôn* (struggling to overpower others in capitalist societies) and *alea* (the chance of being born into nobility). In contrast, ‘primitive’ cultures were structured around *mimicry* (masks used in religious settings) and *ilinx* (drug-induced rituals connecting the members of society). In the multicultural context of *Mass Effect*, we see how different gamelike attitudes towards partying intersect. The party's representation thus provides a multicultural perspective – in alignment with the game series' ideological project of embracing multiculturalism (cf. Hayden, 2017). However, despite presenting an innovative vision of the future and of diverse cultures, the representation of the in-game party in *Mass Effect* feels predictable. This hints that culturally reproduced forms of parties are hard to forego. Nevertheless, whether the party follows the established structures of, for example, a typical Western house party or not (cf. Demant & Østergaard, 2007), the purpose is to create what Tolkien (1947) defines as *secondary belief*. Even in the context of alien cultures, our minds need some familiarity to connect with before they can be broadened to accept the fictional elements. The party, thus, is merely a costume. The representation of the party is, in itself, an act of *mimicry*, and although the characters are aliens, they are also tropes, connected to known preconceptions within popular culture. For example, Tali is the Badass Bookworm, Wrex the Bruiser

with a Soft Centre, and EDI the Benevolent A.I., among other tropes, as outlined on the TV Tropes wiki (cf. TV Tropes, n.d.a, n.d.b; n.d.c).

Indeed, parties exhibit gamelike qualities, and, as we have shown, the theoretical work on defining partying in the DLC reveals a set of Western norms, clichés, and scripts. This representation of a party is indeed comparable to scripts in cognitive linguistics, for instance, the restaurant script (cf. Schank & Abelson, 1977). The elementary usefulness of any script is, of course, its applicability to common everyday situations, which enables us to execute an action unconsciously, which eases our quotidian experience of reality, much like any prescriptive manual of how to behave – comparable, for instance, to John Bridges's (2008) *How to Be a Gentleman*. The representation of the party also serves as a reminder of the multifarious faces of fun, and of the complexity of enjoyment. *Food preferences* – low lactose, gluten-free, vegan, kosher, halal – are often taken into consideration by the host of any party nowadays. Still, as shown in this study, a broader scope of *fun preferences* should likewise be considered when throwing a party!

Limitations

Having based this analysis on a deductive, theoretically informed approach, our gaze is naturally limited. Moreover, this study focuses on *one* of the potential party scenarios in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC. Other, more energetic representations of parties should be studied to differentiate among various forms of parties and to further typological classifications of parties. Likewise, the Cailloisian approach towards games and play would be beneficial to apply to other ways of partying, to establish a sociology of the form and function of festive activities across various contexts. Additionally, accounting for party distinctions based on social background variables would be a natural next step in this budding scholarly endeavour. Finally, interweaving the Cailloisian concepts with Goffman's (1959) notions of frontstage and backstage behaviours would provide richer nuances of the archetypal partygoers and of which play forms and which relations towards rules occur in frontstage and backstage settings, respectively.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Tomas Skotare at Humlab, Umeå University, for assistance with the graphical visualisation in Figure 2, and Kent Löfgren at the Department of Education, Umeå University, for a thorough proofreading of the final draft.

Co-authorship statement

Timvig wrote the theory sections; Engqvist wrote the contextual sections. The design of the study, along with the analysis and conclusion, were all conducted and written jointly by both authors.

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Appendix 1

Time	Character	Quote	Concept
PROLOGUE			
01:18	Joker	"I'm going to go out and see how much trouble I can get into without snapping a femur."	MUHŌ
ACT 1			
06:30	Jack	"Nice ink, but you've got a long way to go to catch up."	AGÔN
06:33	James	"Nah, I just got this when I lost my squad a few years ago."	AGÔN
06:44	Cortez	"Tactful as always" [as a response to James's question of "how far down" Jack's tattoo stretches].	LĪLĀ
06:52	Traynor	"I can't get over the size of this apartment. The electric bill alone could have paid for my college tuition."	AGÔN
06:58	Liara	"Or funded the war."	AGÔN
07:01	Garrus	"Or made a nice down payment on one of those Atlas mechs."	AGÔN
07:06	Tali	"Or put an air conditioner in this suit. You have no idea how hot it gets."	AGÔN
07:16	Joker	"You know why Cerberus is going to lose? Demographics. You recruit a guy who's 20 and got no life, he'll work his ass off for the cause, but do you see any old people in..."	MUHŌ
08:00	Miranda	"I think the expression you want is kissing babies."	LUDUS
08:44	Traynor	"So, you're Archangel. James told me it was some sort of maid service on Omega."	MUHŌ
09:38	Kasumi	"And crunches. Lots of crunches."	ILINX
09:38	Kasumi	(Shows up, interrupting a conversation).	PAIDIA
09:42	Shepard	"Hey! Not okay, Kasumi."	LUDUS
09:56	EDI	"Jeff, do you remember that I am also a Cerberus project?"	LUDUS

11:20	Samara	"If I had a credit for every amorous attempt I've had to reject over the centuries, I could purchase the Citadel."	AGÔN
11:28	Liara	"When I was an archaeology student, I found Galactic dialects to be fascinating! All of the phonetic variants..."	LUDUS
11:35	Tali	"... is the last thing we should talk about at a party."	MUHÕ
17:53	Javik	"Protean gatherings were nothing like this. We considered the future and respected the dead."	LUDUS
18:00	Zaeed	"There's usually more yelling and cursing at any gatherings I go to."	ILINX
18:07	Grunt	"Yeah, get a bunch of Krogan together and things always get fun and probably broken."	ILINX
18:14	Wrex	"You're right. These things are better when you have redundant systems and natural plate armour."	ILINX
19:57	Javik	"50,000 years from now, no one will remember this party. What is the point?"	MUHÕ
ACT 2			
21:04	Wrex	"Drink!" (Grunt) "I'm drinking, but it's not a drinking game." (Wrex)	AGÔN
21:09	Grunt	"Afraid to lose?" (Grunt) "Nothing to do with fear. I know I'll lose." (Wrex)	AGÔN
21:55	Javik	"I would like to touch you."	MUHÕ
22:30	Tali	"Of course, the SR2 is much bigger, so they upgraded the ventilation."	MIMICRY
22:52	Tali	"What you have to imagine my arms are the wings."	MIMICRY
23:45	Wrex	"On the arm here? Got that taking some knives off a gang of drunk Batarians. They figured they could stop me from collecting the bounty on their boss."	AGÔN
24:18	EDI	"I am observing displays of complex social entropy, so yes, I am having a good time."	LUDUS
24:53	Grunt	"Shepard."	ILINX
24:57	Wrex	"Shepard!"	ILINX

25:50	Shepard	"Sure, uh, you might want to tap the brakes a little."	LĪLĀ
26:45	Cortez	"Actually, I'm a dessert guy. My aunt used to make this chocolate lava bomb cake."	AGÔN
28:09	Jack	"Is there a place I can go light something on fire?"	ILINX
28:48	James	"Yeah, but which one's better?"	AGÔN
32:26	Joker	"EDI said you found her voice attractive..."	AGÔN
32:30	Traynor	"That was when I thought she was a VI..."	AGÔN
33:34	Samara	"Then I found this quiet corner. Reflecting on one's place in the universe while a party rages within reach can feel oddly self-affirming."	PAIDIA
33:43	Shepard	"Meditating isn't often considered party behaviour."	LUDUS
34:07	Shepard	"Now get back out there and have some fun."	LĪLĀ
35:08	Joker	"We're just happy giving each other shit."	MUHŌ
35:11	Shepard	"We can call EDI over, and you can discuss your feelings like mature adults."	MUHŌ
36:42	Kaidan	"So, do you think we should start dancing or something?"	ILINX
37:13	Garrus	"Ah, there are too many windows, and they're... too big. Makes it easy for someone to track your movements, but it's got potential. Be easy to set up a defensible position over there."	MIMICRY
37:26	Zaeed	"I'd extend a wall out. Prevent someone from sticking you in the back."	MIMICRY
ACT 3			
39:52	Tali	"You want to see my tattoo?"	ILINX
43:05	Garrus	"Micro filaments, Shepard. Tiny strips of explosives laid across the glass in a grid. It's your first line of defence when an intruder enters. Hit the switch and boom!"	MIMICRY
45:56	Liara	"You're bluffing."	ALEA
45:58	James	"Don't be so sure."	ALEA

47:54	EDI	"You see, Shepard. A party is a social construct that can be designed for maximum efficiency."	LUDUS
48:46	Javik	"Be glad we are not participating in one of the games from my cycle. You would all lose horribly."	AGÔN
48:51	Kasumi	"Aww, be nice Liara, you're going to have your hands full with me anyway." (Playing poker)	ALEA
50:51	Javik	"Hahaha! I will never tire of tricking the primitives. That is a game I enjoy playing."	MIMICRY
