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Abstract

In this article we explore the influence of parties and the emergence of party videogames in the early 1980s at Mattel Electronics, at the time a division of the massive toy company Mattel. Despite the relative marginality of party games in game studies, we have much to gain from studying their history and transformations. Intellivision, produced by Mattel Electronics, was the main rival to the Atari VCS and differed from the latter through an emphasis on sophisticated gameplay. The turn to Intellivision party games involved a vision for home videogaming, but also reflected how the category of 'party' shaped cultures of work, play, and design at Mattel Electronics. Attending to the complexity of the party category, we examine how a party ethos shaped Intellivision videogame production and how actual parties influenced game design and labor practices. Then we analyze how some Intellivision videogames were forged around the party category in terms of their simplicity, short play times, stimulating effects and socialization features, focusing on 'Party Line,' a cartridge that was almost finished before the great 1984 videogame crash in the US shuttered Mattel Electronics. From this analysis we draw a range of insights that illuminate the place of party studies in game studies. That place cannot be reduced to party games as such. Nor can it be reduced to festive, rebellious, and spirited gatherings. Parties as organizational practices played a crucial role in fostering creativity and teamwork, and had structural implications for weaving together different forms of labor. If party studies is an attempt to take seriously what has been often disregarded as frivolous, then it is important to note the cultural work that party games can do within larger historical contexts – like expanding our understanding of diverse gamers and legitimating videogames as an acceptable pastime to skeptical publics.

Keywords

Intellivision; labor; Mattel Electronics; party games; party studies; videogame history

At a deli in Los Angeles in November 1982, William Fisher, Keith Robinson, and Andy Sells were on their lunch break lamenting the success of *Trivial Pursuit*. The board game had become a cultural phenomenon, sparking parties at homes across North America (Schiro, 1983). They were programmers who worked on the Intellivision videogame system and worried that videogames were getting a bad reputation.¹ People were coming together in happy communion to play *Trivial Pursuit* while videogames were denigrated as anti-social, producing captivated ‘vidiots’ more interested in computers than their fellow human beings. The programmers realized that in response they could design cartridges for parties, leveraging that festive atmosphere to rehabilitate the solitary image of videogames. Looking up at the deli’s menu, they saw that the list of sandwiches three feet and longer – meant for groups to share – was called The Party Line. The idea for Party Line videogames was born.²

Excited to tell their boss, Gabriel Baum, the programmers returned to Mattel Electronics, the division of the massive toy company Mattel which developed and marketed Intellivision. Unfortunately, their lunchtime brainstorming had led to missing a meeting, and Baum was livid. So the programmers waited to pitch their idea, working up a proposal and game prototype in their free time. On February 3rd, 1983, “they filled a conference room with balloons and streamers” and pitched the Party Line idea (Robinson, n.d. a). Baum was pleased. Champagne was poured. The launch party – a pitch party of sorts – was a success.

This origin story is deceptively trivial. An ostensible vignette of inspiration and innovation, it hints at how the category of ‘party’ shaped cultures of work and play at Mattel Electronics. The lunchtime conversation led to an early experiment in party videogames, an academically neglected genre that has spawned hits like *Mario Party* (Nintendo, 1998–2025), *Gang Beasts* (Boneloaf, 2017), and *The Jackbox Party Pack* (Jackbox Games, 2014–2026). The subsequent presentation demonstrated the work of parties within the office. In fact, the history of Mattel Electronics featured many kinds of parties. These included corporate parties to launch new software and hardware; brainstorming parties at parks, bars, and restaurants; arcade parties to integrate organizational units and research game possibilities; and celebratory parties to honor achievement and recognize success. Alongside these actual parties, an ethos of partying pervaded videogame development. Robinson once referred to the atmosphere at Mattel Electronics as “half stress, half party” – a fun, sometimes zany, workplace that was also steeped in long hours and impending deadlines (Robinson, 1998). We see this in the origin story recounted above. A creative lunchtime breakthrough resulted in the just desserts of condemnation from the boss, leading to off-hours development of a passion project.

1 The recounting of this lunch is based on Robinson (n.d. a).

2 We use title case when referring to the proposed concept, quote marks (*Party Line*) for the unfinished game, and italics (*Party Line*) for the cartridge after its 2021 release.

In this article we explore one origin of party videogames, and how parties shaped work at Mattel Electronics. However, our analysis extends to party studies and videogame history more generally. Party studies scholarship has often noted “the word *party* defies easy definition”, typically concluding that “a party is a festive gathering” (Elza, Edgerton, & Jackson, 2010, p. 1). Occasionally scholars acknowledge other meanings, like search party or party to a lawsuit (LaBelle, 2021). But these are neither etymological fossils nor false cognates. Addressing this polysemous complexity shapes the place of party studies in game studies itself.

‘Party’ (whose etymology is shared with ‘part’ and ‘partition’) originally referred to a “group of people on one side in a contest, battle ... in opposition to others; a faction” (Oxford University Press, 2026). These remain active, contemporary meanings of ‘party’, as in notions of an aggrieved party or a political party. The emergence of ‘third-party videogame companies’ in the early 1980s reflects these meanings of party, which cannot be reduced to festive gatherings.

Furthermore, even the festive-gathering meaning of party is complex. It cannot be understood via the classical notion of categories as having either-or membership, where it is assumed that “anything that meets the definition is just as good a category member as anything else” (Murphy, 2002, p. 15). Instead, categories are radial, with gradients of membership and prototype effects toward the center.³ For example, one prototypical party is a birthday party for a child, with games and a cake, held at the home of the child in question and involving invitations. Less typical parties are for adults, do not celebrate an occasion, are connected to work (an office party), or are unknown to the honoree (a surprise party). But these are all still parties. Parties have different temporal, affective, and locational structures. With regard to affect, parties are typically fun (as the phrase ‘in the mood to party’ indicates), but need not be fun for some or even all participants. Festivity is typical, not definitional, as many who have attended office parties can attest (compare Masek & Stenros, 2024).

We seek to attend to the complexity of the party category. At Mattel Electronics, parties could be festive, but not always. They played an important role in videogame design and labor practices, product promotion, and linking programmers and marketers. The Party Line videogames extended typical ideas of party, framing domestic gameplay as a festive, group activity mediated by technology, while also using parties to promote and market Intellivision.

Our analysis is based on more than a decade of research on Intellivision, including over 150 interviews and around 20,000 pages of archival materials (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024). We conducted additional interviews with two key developers of Intellivision party games, William Fisher and Julie Hoshizaki, and were able to play *Party Line* games with them (since this unfinished cartridge was released in 2021).

³ See, *inter alia*, Lakoff, 1987; Murphy, 2002, 2024; Rosch, 1973.

Our methods are based on a ‘near history’ approach, where we were able to use archival documents to engage interviewees in historical analysis. This is analogous to ‘augmented interviews’ used in ethnographic research (Ryder & Miller, 2026; for further discussion see Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, pp. 17–20).

Using this approach, we examine how a party ethos shaped Mattel Electronics and explore how actual parties influenced game design and labor practices. We also analyze how some Intellivision videogames were forged around the party category, focusing on ‘Party Line’, a cartridge that was almost finished before the 1984 US videogame crash (hereafter the Crash) shuttered Mattel Electronics. Our analysis links technical elements to social contexts of labor, design, and gender. Ultimately, we demonstrate the multifaceted importance of parties to the early videogame industry while also detailing an overlooked origin of party videogames and the historical specificities that shaped their inspiration and development.

Working and partying at Mattel Electronics

Intellivision was sold between 1979 and 1984 by Mattel Electronics, at the time a division of Mattel. Founded in 1944 by Ruth and Elliot Handler in Los Angeles, by the 1970s Mattel was a toy industry juggernaut, with hits like Barbie and Hot Wheels. The company had a long history of technological innovation – for instance, Chatty Cathy, a doll released in 1960 with the ability to speak phrases from an inserted phonographic record. Mattel was also known as a marketing innovator, which included developing some of the first television commercials for toys. After its rival the Atari VCS, Intellivision was the most successful videogame system in the US during the early 1980s.

In this article, we focus on a programming group within Mattel Electronics known as Applications Software. As Mattel Electronics consolidated in the late 1970s, it relied heavily on APh Technological Consulting, a company with expertise in computer programming. Every game available at the time of Intellivision’s release was created at APh. Concerned by this dependency, Mattel Electronics executives founded Applications Software to bring game design in house. Gabriel Baum was hired to manage the group: as he recalled, “part of why I was brought in was to get discipline into the creative process” (interview, 21 October 2018). However, he also cultivated creativity within the group, particularly through supporting a party ethos. The idea that managers should “foster ‘cultures of fun’ in contemporary workplaces ... gained momentum in the early 1980s” (Fleming, 2005, p. 285). During this time at Mattel Electronics, a particular articulation of work and play was taking form through the intersection of games and parties.

A range of evidence, from interviews to documents, reveals the playful atmosphere of game design at Applications Software. This regularly took the form of parties, including holiday parties (Priestley & Robinson, 1983); the 1981 holiday party was

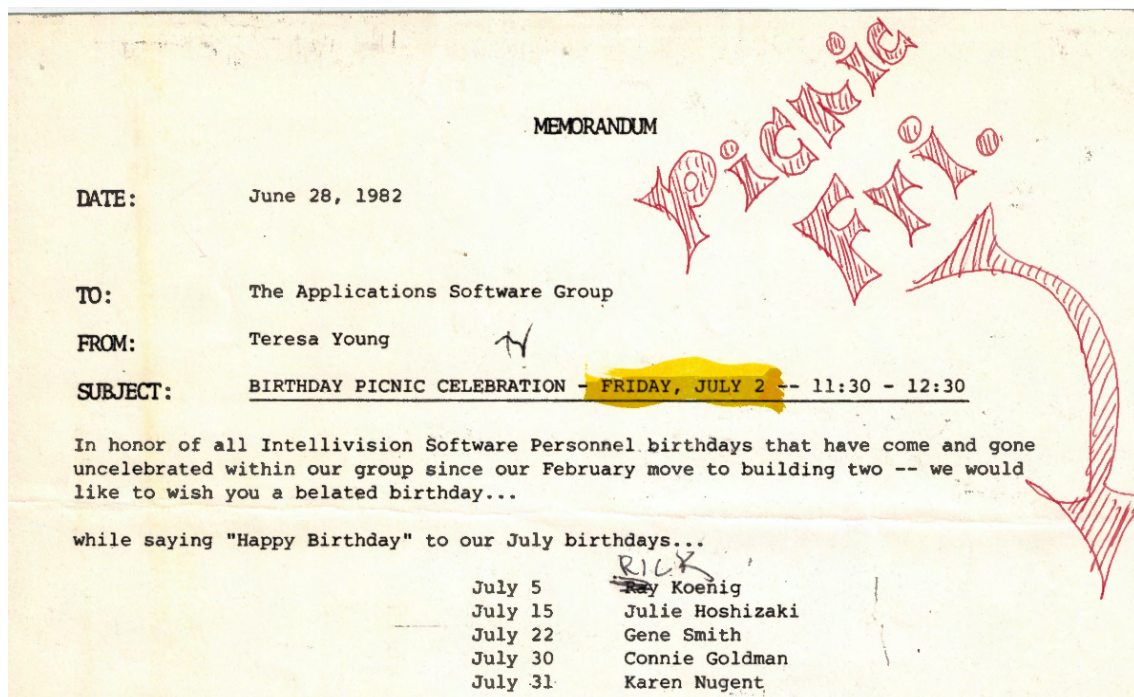


Figure 1. Excerpt, memorandum for a birthday party (Young, 1982).

hosted by the comedian Jay Leno. Employee birthdays were marked with parties, such as a breakfast event with donuts and coffee or a lunch picnic (Figure 1). Often these parties would include acknowledgment of employee achievements (Young, 1982). As time passed, other Applications Software events were framed as parties. For instance, seminars to workshop games were sometimes termed parties, like a "*Masters of the Universe* Brainstorming Session and Cast-Signing Party" (Warhol, 1983). The pitch party for the 'Party Line' videogames mentioned above also promoted programmer ideas. These were not prototypical office parties: yet through this very atypicality, notions of party were intersecting with the labor of game design.

A party atmosphere was central to the early videogame industry. In *Atari Inc.: Business is Fun*, Goldberg and Vendel (2012) discuss a range of parties at Atari going back to the early 1970s. These included Friday night parties, Christmas parties, and even a party "held to celebrate the official opening of Atari's new Corporate Headquarters" (Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, p. 211). In second-generation videogame companies, this party atmosphere was framed within the demands and deadlines of game design. Nolan Bushnell, one of Atari's founders, emphasized "people talk about the party atmosphere, but what they don't realize is that it was all based on hitting quotas" (in A. Fisher, 2018; see Backiel, 2003; Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, pp. 584–585). The phrase 'half stress, half party' mentioned above implicitly recognizes these understandings of a 'party' atmosphere that is not relegated to leisure.

This 'party' atmosphere, particularly at Atari, was informed by the dominance of young men. Scholars have examined how "the development side of video gaming

has always involved a unique type of frat that included the partying generally associated with them" (McDivitt, 2020, p. 13), reflecting how "certain formations of masculinity are, themselves, infrastructural to the production of digital games" (Taylor, 2024, p. 29). For example, the Friday afternoon parties at Atari were also used for recruitment, where women were brought in to speak to male programmers (McDivitt, 2020, p. 26). Questions concerning practices and feelings of inclusion and exclusion in game industry parties continue to be important (Myöhänen, 2025). It is also crucial to recognize that parties differ in terms of social and work-related context, which influence inclusion and gender dynamics.

In contrast to Atari's frat atmosphere, our archival analysis and interviews, particularly with female programmers, paint a picture of relative gender inclusion in Applications Software in the early 1980s. Note that the memorandum above (Figure 1) is about celebrating the birthdays of five programmers in July 1982; three of the five are women. One of them, Connie Goldman, noted how when hired "they gave me a whole month before I showed up because I had a baby at that point and I had to set up daycare. And so they were very generous about that" (interview, 24 October 2018). Another, Karen Nugent, recalled "there really were a lot of women involved at that point, which is pretty cool" (interview, 3 December 2018). The third, Julie Hoshizaki, remembered how when taking a computer science class in college, "all the men realized I was the only woman in the room. And they all turned and looked at me, and I said, 'oh, I better leave'. And I walked out. That was the only time I've ever felt threatened in school or my career" (interview, 13 November 2018). When asked about the work atmosphere and parties at Mattel, Hoshizaki said, "for sure there was no fraternity atmosphere. I never felt threatened or uncomfortable" (interview, 14 March 2026).

Indeed, the women we interviewed who worked as Applications Software programmers emphasized that they were invited to the party. Underrepresentation and exclusion certainly existed, and we have documented evidence concerning a gendered work environment, including sexist materials that support the idea that a frat-like atmosphere existed in some instances (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, pp. 141, 172). This challenges a simple, linear narrative of increasing gender equality, indicating how dynamics and practices in the early videogame industry can provide resources for further study, not just cautionary tales. In addition, scholars must attend to specific contexts, in terms of the type of parties being discussed and corporate work atmospheres. For example, office birthday parties differed from corporate bashes, and Atari's context differed from Mattel, with its history of making girls' toys and presence of women in leadership roles.

In addition to parties at work, it is important to consider work as itself a party. In this form, labor and leisure mingle; work and play merge. Many employees emphasized how work at Mattel Electronics was magical and fun (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 6). Pranks and practical jokes were common, and zany behavior propagated, like hitting rubber duckies with golf clubs in the open cubicle

workspace. While Baum managed creativity and enforced game production schedules, he also cultivated a party ethos, allowing a creative work environment to emerge. Designing videogames required play as much as work, and Baum understood this. Thus, arcade machines were available to play, and spontaneous, festive gatherings would occur, like the famed *Biplanes* tournaments employees fondly remember.

Biplanes, released in 1981 as part of the *Triple Action* cartridge, was a game where two players control planes and try to shoot each other down in a blue sky with two clouds. Despite its simplicity, the flying and shooting mechanics could afford different strategies and play styles – for instance, intentionally going into a stall and shooting backwards while falling. Its short length augmented its social function, catalyzing impromptu office tournaments that attracted small audiences and conviviality. Such forms of “playing together” have remained key features of the labor of videogame design (Sotamaa, 2021, p. 113).

Outside work the party could continue, with some programmers hosting actual parties or organizing activities after work or during lunch. Eric Del Sesto was only 18 when hired at Applications Software, and emphasized the welcoming, playful reception he received (interview, 23 February 2021). He recalled “we did a lot of things outside of work together ... seemed like almost every night there was something going on that I could attach myself to, to have fun. And that was a great atmosphere” (Del Sesto, 1988). Party studies, broadly conceived beyond the study of prototypical parties, can help us think about organizational and social partitions between party/stress, work/play, and how one can emerge in the other. Play can erupt at work, work can leak out into leisure spaces, and in some cases the partitions become difficult to distinguish. For example, softball teams at Mattel Electronics led to leisure time socialization. Hoshizaki recalled visiting nearby arcades during lunch breaks to play games, as did Fisher, who added “it was research. It was also fun, but it was research” (interview, 20 August 2025).

Often occurring in bars, restaurants, and parks, Mattel Electronics brainstorming sessions exemplified work as party and mingled leisure and labor. When the journalist Howard Polskin observed Intellivision programmers for a *TV Guide* article in February 1982, they spent time brainstorming in a corporate office before heading to a restaurant. Polskin explained that Baum wanted “to pump some wine into them to help loosen their thoughts”, thinking that a “change of atmosphere might spark their thinking” (Polskin, 1982, p. 42). Parties themselves are all about atmosphere and social context, but in this case, the festive atmosphere and stimulating effects of alcohol channeled creative thinking. Even in 1982, Polskin understood that play and partying were being used to cajole labor: “When Mattel wants to stoke them, it knows which buttons to push” (Polskin, 1982, p. 44). In these situations, play and labor merge, becoming what scholars call playbor, where passion, playfulness, and even partying can motivate and sustain work (Bulut, 2020; Kücklich, 2005).

AGREEMENTMATTEL ELECTRONICS USE OF THE UNDERGROUND, REDONDO PIER

Purpose: Mattel Electronics (Mattel) desires to use The Underground, an electronic game room at Redondo Beach Pier (Underground) for purposes of exposing their staff to a "video game arcade experience".

Date: Wednesday, July 14, 1982

Time: From 5:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M. (the session).

Attendees: Approximately seventy (70) Mattel employees and their associates.

Cost: \$400.00 for the session.

Terms: Paid in advance - prior to July 7, 1982.

Figure 2. Excerpt, rental agreement memorandum (Doepke, 1982).

Polskin noted that the night following the brainstorming session, an actual Mattel Electronics party was planned – the “definition of heaven” for the programmers, he speculated, since it “was held in an empty Redondo beach video-game arcade, and every game was free for the night” (Polskin, 1982, p. 44). This was not an isolated incident: such parties were held twice a year during the Intellivision period. These parties were festive, but had other purposes too. As one industry publication noted at the time, corporate parties can “generate excitement and interest during relatively inactive periods” (Stacey, 1979, p. 82). The biannual parties were used in this way, particularly before demanding work periods (Baum, 1983b). Moreover, the rental agreement with the arcade explained that, for Mattel Electronics, the event was “for purposes of exposing their staff to a ‘video game arcade experience’” – revealing that this exposure was crucial to the employees’ work (Doepke, 1982; Figure 2). It was fun, but also research. Indeed, at the time these parties occurred, Mattel Electronics was pivoting from sports to arcade-style videogames and ports of arcade games in order to compete with its main rival Atari.

The arcade parties served organizational functions as well, commingling marketers and programmers. Baum’s memos announced that “to ensure a continuous rise to as yet unreached pinnacles of creativity this year, a joint Software-Marketing party will be held” (Baum, 1983a), or that “the Software group in close coordination with the Marketing group will be hosting a party” (Baum, 1982b, see Baum, 1982a). Partitions between marketing staff and designers had a long history at Mattel Toys, and this persisted in Mattel Electronics. These tensions were captured by the Creative Media staff Brad Geagley in a satirical guide for programmers that paired short statements with images from Dante’s *Inferno*. One page read “you will learn that Marketing has the final say on what products you will assist in developing ... occasionally, however, small hostilities have been known to surface” (Geagley, n.d., Figure 3).



OCCASIONALLY, HOWEVER, SMALL HOSTILITIES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO SURFACE.

GOING ON, YOU WILL MEET YOUR CO-WORKERS:

Figure 3. Excerpt, Dante's infernal guide to applications software (Geagley, n.d.).

Baum used parties to bridge this segregation. Party scholars have often drawn on theories of ritual, liminality, and integration, particularly when addressing parties as part of a cultural field including carnivals and play (Bakhtin, 1984; Sutton-Smith, 1997). At Mattel Electronics, parties could counterbalance organizational partitions between the 'creative' programmers and marketers. This reveals an awareness that marketers were themselves creatives; their insights helped develop video-games that would sell. These parties were not liminal but integral, linking two forms of labor.

These parties were labor in their own right – a reminder that party studies should attend to scholarship in organizational studies and labor studies on fun and play (Barsoux, 1993; Greenwich, 2001; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Yerkes, 2001). Parties are not all partying. They require a significant amount of work. The party noted above, involving renting an arcade from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., cost about \$1,350 in 2026 dollars; staff collected RSVPs, provided directions, created agreements for services and rental fees, organized catering, and even bought plates and forks at the supermarket (Doepke, 1982; see figure 2). This reflects how partying and work are linked: parties typically have hosts or organizers who labor to create atmosphere and put on the event.

While these programmer/marketing parties linked organizational structures within Mattel Electronics, other parties faced outward. During this pre-internet era, conventions played a key role in sales. For Mattel Electronics, the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) was crucial. At CES, parties were a way for Mattel Electronics to build relationships with vendors. As one party organizer wrote in the industry magazine *Playthings*, corporate parties to introduce new products were a “meaningful way to reinforce advertising, marketing, and sales” (Stacey, 1979, 82). As far back as the June 1978 CES, likely the first for Mattel Electronics, there was a “cocktail party for reps” (Wall, 1978). Other companies did the same, like Atari, whose marketing staff held cocktail parties “where distributors [could] see some of the new products Atari would be introducing that year” (Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, p. 368).

Parties, then, took a range of forms at Mattel Electronics, shaping the ethos and labor of Intellivision videogame development. This was also the context in which the genre of party videogames emerged.

Party games at Mattel Electronics

Like other second-generation consoles, Intellivision was bringing videogames into the home, the locus par excellence of parties. However, party games were not an influential force within Intellivision game development. This was the case despite the fact that Mattel Toys released analog party games long before Intellivision, including “the snuggle struggle home party game” *Tight Squeeze* (1967), *Blarney* (1970), *Up For Grabs* (1978b), and *Groop Loop* (1978a) – a *Twister*-like game. Historically, Mattel Electronics quickly became functionally separate from Mattel Toys, a competitive siloing exacerbated by the former’s phenomenal success in the early 1980s, when Intellivision was bringing in more revenue than Barbie and Hot Wheels combined.

If Mattel Electronics staff were unlikely to get party game ideas from the Toy division, they were no more likely to get them from the nascent world of home videogames. Party videogames were not a recognized genre during the second generation. For instance, when Chris Crawford published the landmark work *The Art of Computer Game Design* in 1984, he did not include party games in his taxonomy of computer games. Crawford did identify “social lubrication” and icebreaking scenarios, but as motivations for playing games, not categories of videogames themselves (Crawford, 1984, p. 16).

Intellivision videogames reflected this marginalization of party games. Programmers focused at first on producing sports and strategy titles. Some of these required two players – for example, *Major League Baseball* (1979a), *NFL Football* (1979b), *Sea Battle* (1980b), and *Utopia* (1982c). However, while it only takes two to tango, parties generally require more participants. An exception was *Horse Racing*, released in 1980 as one of the console’s original titles. *Horse Racing* allows for up to

six players, all of whom place bets on four-horse races. One or two of the horses can be player controlled, or all four can be left to the console. One of us recalls raucous family parties where *Horse Racing* was played collectively. Although ‘party’ is never mentioned in the instruction manual, the game’s box states that it is “a great party game!”.

Beyond *Horse Racing*, there were sporadic suggestions for Intellivision party games. In 1981, one fan sent a letter to Mattel Electronics suggesting they develop a ‘Pin the Tail on the Donkey’ videogame. Baum responded to the fan, explaining that programmers were “developing many new cartridges for 1982 and 1983 including action cartridges, party cartridges, and cartridges aimed at different age groups” (Baum, 1981). It is unclear what party cartridges Baum had in mind. Some brainstorming sessions for new products did mention party game possibilities like “follow-the-leader party type games” and “charades” (Sohl, 1981).

In this article we focus on the Intellivision console, known as the Master Component. However, Mattel Electronics also proposed a Keyboard Component, which would turn the Master Component into a home computer (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 3). Although technical challenges prevented a general release of the Keyboard Component, enormous development took place for it. This included party game ideas. For example, an idea for a Mad Libs cassette – a “party game played by two or more players” – was suggested in a memo whose recipients included Baum (Naddor, 1981). In another example, a memo proposed party gaming for the Keyboard Component:

Intellivision would take the role of Games Master at your next party. A variety of games – word, action, logic, etc. – would be programmed into the computer, and would remember each player’s name. For instance, in a variation on ‘Twister’, Intellivision would command, “Joey, put your hand on Diane’s ankle”. (Script Development, 1980)

Party games were separated from the usual videogame fare and listed alongside self-improvement, health, and wellness applications, thus linking them to broader social contexts. The suggestion that the computer would remember each player’s name emphasized personalization and intimacy, crucial to health and self-care applications as well. The example of Joey touching Diane’s ankle reinforces this intimacy, as does the idea that game mechanics for party videogames would extend into the physical environment. Party gaming required understanding social context and intimacy, whereas other videogame genres replaced context with psychological projection into a fantasy world.

In the early videogame industry, there were conflicting perceptions regarding if videogames were solitary or social. The first arcade games – like two-player *Pong* (Atari, 1972) – appeared in bars, a key location of socialization. One might imagine arcades of the time populated by isolated individuals engrossed in *Pac-Man*

(Namco, 1980), *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), or *Asteroids* (Atari, 1979). But arcades were also social, with onlookers, competitions, groups of friends hanging out, and even birthday parties and other social gatherings. At home, early videogaming was linked to family entertainment, not individual use (Newman, 2017). For instance, Intellivision's early sports games required two players because of this link to domestic entertainment, and because cartridge memory limitations made computer opponents hard to implement.

When Mattel Electronics programmer John Sohl was imagining new titles for Intellivision in December 1980, shortly after the system's release, he imagined 'conventional games' like *Othello*, *Scrabble*, chess, and bridge, all social games with two or more players. Sohl (1980) explained that "one of the "great advantages" of Intellivision was that "it can take the place of a missing second player", particularly when some players "live alone", "are married to a non-game-player", or are "night people living in a house full of morning people". Crawford made a similar observation, explaining that creating an "illusory personality against which the player competes ... is one of the most exciting and least developed potentials of the computer as a game technology" (1984, p. 10).

Crawford and Sohl were not wrong, and at Mattel Electronics one-player games became more dominant as Intellivision's catalog grew. Their thoughts anticipate how videogames might transform the social space of play, contributing to the growth of single-player game experiences within the home and to an atmosphere where party gaming would be less visible as an innovation.

"Get on the Party Line"

It was not until early 1983 that party games solidified as a goal at Mattel Electronics, challenging the idea that videogame development should shift to single-player, arcade-style experiences. As noted in the introduction, Fisher, Robinson, and Sells proposed the Party Line concept to their boss, Gabriel Baum, in February 1983. On May 13, the concept was formally presented to Mattel Electronics leadership, including Josh Denham, President of Mattel Electronics. In a 1998 interview, Fisher (1998) recalled how they "served punch and cookies" while explaining "we had this line of games that were based on playing them at parties... And they loved it".

This pitch party was accompanied by a detailed proposal which outlined the reasoning behind the new line of videogames. The proposal represents one of the earliest known analyses regarding what party games might entail for home videogame systems. It contains rich ideas regarding how to create a new type of videogame, commodify the social space of parties, produce new forms of videogame marketing, extend videogame play to more diverse audiences, and forge design ideas integrated with social contexts. Denham wrote an effusive memo to Fisher, Sells, and Robinson (1983), proclaiming "it's one of the best marketing ideas that I

have heard in a long time". Robinson was praised in his performance review from this period, which noted that the party game "concept identifies the need for these games and describes its implementation realistically in terms of programming, marketing, and advertising" (Minkoff, 1983). What was the reasoning behind this proposal that generated such excitement?

The first goal listed in the Party Line proposal was the "elimination of negative pre-conceptions about video games", ostensibly solved by the second goal mentioned, to "[expose] people to videogames in a positive environment", like a party (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). We mentioned before how Fisher, Robinson, and Sells were upset that magazine coverage of the boardgame *Trivial Pursuit* was generating negative press for videogames: the "solitary (i.e. antisocial) fad of video games, the magazines declared, was dead" (Robinson, n.d. a). Indeed, Crawford identified these perceptions as a "weakness" of videogames, writing that "many computer games are played alone, leading to the accusation that the games are antisocial. A board game invites a group of people to sit around the table. A computer game encourages one player, accepts two, but discourages more" (Crawford, 1984, p. 47). Party videogames, the proposal articulated, would combat negative perceptions related to videogaming. Instead of associating videogaming with solitary play in the home or arcades (which at the time were still often seen as dens of crime, adolescent corruption, and gambling) people's introduction to videogames could occur in an exciting party atmosphere. This connects party gaming's origins at Mattel Electronics to disparate moments in videogame history, such as the rise of serious games in the 2000s, also bent on shifting negative perspectives surrounding games concerning their trivial nature.

At the heart of the Party Line idea was reaching "many potential video game owners that have not been sold on video games" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). The goal was to invite more people to the party of videogaming that was raging within the US. The proposal playfully nodded at the polysemic richness of 'party', ending with "Mattel Electronics should get on The Party Line" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 16). The phrase alludes to the political meaning of 'party line', the official policies of a political party. The polysemy was catchy but also intentionally meaningful: the programmers wanted management and marketing to adopt their game idea as an official 'product line' which, in turn, could bring more players into Intellivision's tent.

In fact, the catchy phrase is triply polysemous. From the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, many US homes had 'party lines' where they shared a telephone number with other households, fostering a range of cultural practices around eavesdropping, sharing, and community (Donovan, 2016; C. Fisher, 1992; Rymarczuk, 2016). The phrase 'get on the Party Line' invokes this history: one key aspect of the Party Line games was that players would share gameplay, like different customers sharing a phone line. The proposal authors wrote that the party games would be designed to be "played by anywhere from two to five hundred and ten people at a

time" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 13). The reference to 510 is a programmer's inside joke. As Fisher noted:

255 is the largest possible value for an eight-bit number such as a player number counter. If we have two teams and each has a separate player number counter, the largest possible number of players we can support is twice 255, or 510. (Interview, 11 September 2025)

But this also playfully stands in for multiplicity in general, a radically different conception of videogame sociality beyond one or two-player games.

In the Party Line proposal, the authors express concern that videogames are limited in their capacity to serve multiple players – in comparison to, for example, boardgames. In the early 1980s, there were still millions of US homes without costly game consoles or computers. The idea that a single game system could be shared among many players at social gatherings responded to these limits – recalling how shared party line phone systems responded to limited (and costly) dedicated lines. The proposal suggested as a common feature of Party Line games that guests would be divided into teams, with the controllers regularly "handed to the next player" during gameplay (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). Indeed, "the excitement and pressure of handing off the controllers" was presented as a key feature of the game experience – a social mechanic allowing gameplay to extend "beyond the cartridge" where "the entire party/crowd atmosphere, becomes a part of the game" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). The party atmosphere would change game design, and game design would change the party, signaling interactions in the world.

Reaching more players, creating shared videogames, and being aware of the social context were key components that linked Party Line games to a broader marketing and sales vision. In their proposal, Fisher, Robinson, & Sells asserted that one advantage for party games would be an "Expansion of Market" and exposing "large numbers of non-video game owners to our systems in a fun environment" (1983, p. 5). Extending beyond the cartridge was not just about gameplay, but promoting Intellivision through party atmospheres. The proposal suggested that "the party theme can be easily exploited by marketing and advertising" and that "'Party Sales' have been proved in the past (e.g. Tupperware). We are providing software that SELLS ITSELF AND SYSTEMS" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5, capitalization in original). The Party Line concept involved not just games but promotion, connecting to the ways that Tupperware and other companies were finding success with parties as sales events linked to the home and to femininity – an example of how gendered contexts could influence specific kinds of parties in the industry.

These ideas were well received by management because party games were framed strategically in relation to Intellivision's market position and outlook. Fisher emphasized that the Party Line concept – proposing a whole genre and series of

games – was motivated by a sense they needed to “go big or go home” given the state of the videogame industry in 1983 (interview, 20 August 2025). The concept “was a Hail Mary”, Fisher added, because “not enough people were playing our video games and we needed to get more people involved” (interview, 20 August 2025). Intellivision had always been far behind its rival Atari in terms of market share, but by 1983 the entire US home videogame boom was eroding, fast. For the February–April 1983 period, when *Party Line* was pitched, Mattel Electronics sales were a measly \$22 million, down from almost \$120 million for the same period in 1982. For the May–July 1983 period, there was a shocking loss of \$201 million. About 15% of staff were fired.⁴ In September, a ruthless review of unfinished games recommended ‘Party Line’ for termination, explaining that the “party concept [is] deemed artificial and invalid” (Rochlis, 1983). Fortunately, market testing indicated the concept had promise, and development continued even through further layoffs (Robinson, n.d. a). Six possible games had been proposed, and management greenlighted developing the three that were closest to completion – *Space Cadet*, *Blow Out*, and *Hard Hat*.

In *Space Cadet*, two teams each control a flying saucer that flies between two planets – one icy blue and white, the other fiery red and orange. Twinkling stars appear randomly in the background; touching one causes a shot to be fired at your opponent’s planet, changing a piece of it to your own planet’s color (Figure 4). The goal is



Figure 4. *Space Cadet* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

4 For more details, see Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 13.



Figure 5. *Blow Out* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

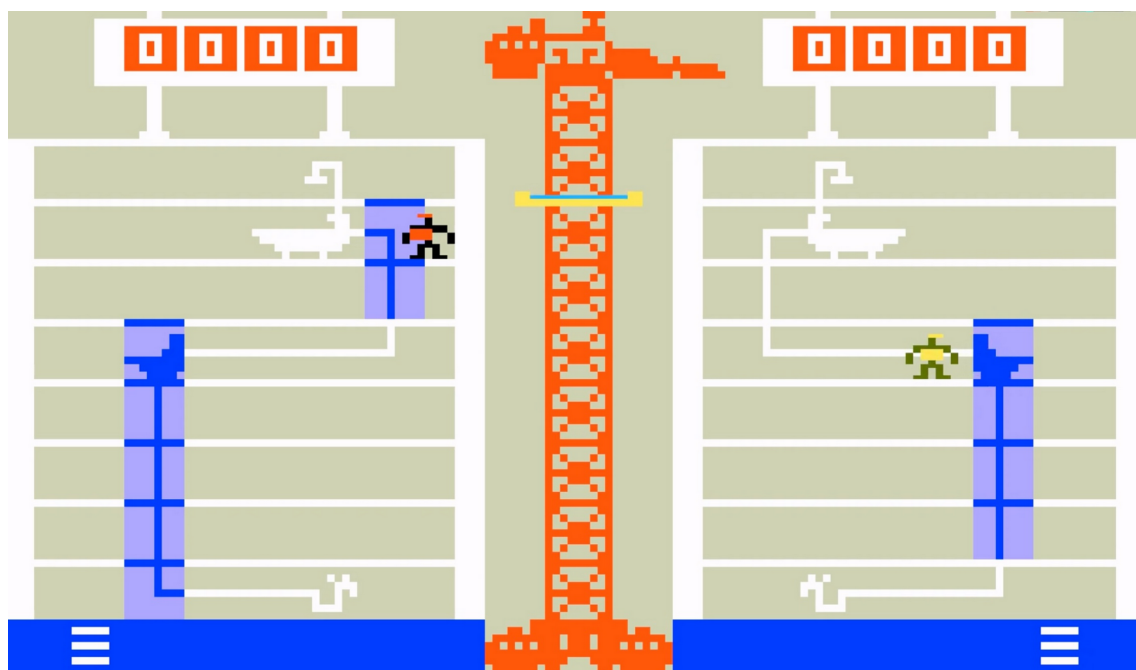


Figure 6. *Hard Hat* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

to completely transform the opposing team's planet into your planet's colors. In *Blow Out*, two rollerskaters move on the top of a building's rafters, dropping darts to pop balloons and gain points (Figure 5). The team that pops the most balloons wins. In *Hard Hat* two teams each control a worker installing windows on a highrise building, competing to install more windows and gain more points (Figure 6).

Despite work on these titles, 'Party Line' did not survive the Crash. The three games were nearly complete and shown at the 1984 January CES (Minkoff, 1984a). Two weeks later, Mattel Electronics shut down. The party was over. The much smaller company that bought the rights to Intellivision in 1984 did not further develop 'Party Line', in part because they decided to release only one-player games (Robinson, n.d. a).

'Party Line' largely disappeared from history. It reappeared only in 2021 – 37 years after the 1984 CES demo – when Intellivision expert and homebrew developer Joe Zbiciak, working with a group of former Intellivision programmers, stitched the ROMs for the three games together. As released, the games retain their various states of completion. *Space Cadet* was the only finished *Party Line* game. In March 1984, as Intellivision was being sold off, one memo noted "Space Cadet is complete and would be pre-code released if it was an individual game" (Minkoff, 1984b). *Blow Out* was still unfinished, with an estimated "2-4 weeks of adding features" needed (Minkoff, 1984a). Finally, *Hard Hat* was "nearly complete", but did "not have the time limit/multiple player teams feature in yet" (Minkoff, 1983; 1984a). While these games never had a chance to be the life of the party, they provide valuable insights into the design of party games at Mattel Electronics.

Party Line and game design

While not released until 2021, *Party Line* demonstrates a vision for party games and their development. This vision was articulated in the Party Line proposal, where the authors offered a set of principles for party game design:

(A) colorful graphics; (B) fun, bouncy music; (C) easy game concepts; (D) simple use of hand controllers; (E) large number of people can play; (F) short 'turns' so everyone gets a chance; (G) game play extends 'beyond the cartridge'—the excitement and pressure of handing off the controllers, the rooting for 'your team', the entire party/crowd atmosphere, become a part of the game. (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 12)

We can distill these ideas into four design principles: simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization.

From the outset, simplification was seen as vital for reaching partygoers who had not played videogames before. It was a general principle, articulated in terms of

easily digested goals, mechanics, and game concepts. It was, however, a seemingly contradictory principle for Intellivision. After all, true to its name, Intellivision was marketed as more sophisticated than its rival Atari which had less memory, simpler graphics, and its one-button joystick. In contrast, for example Intellivision's complex hand controllers had a twelve-button keypad, four action buttons, and a disc (not joystick) with sixteen directions of movement. Some complex Intellivision games could use all of this functionality.

The proposal authors challenged this core premise of Intellivision, asserting that complexity discouraged new players. They explained that a negative perception of videogames was that they "are too complex to learn. Especially true of Intellivision games with instruction booklets that can run to thirty pages and buttons that are used for different things at different times during the game" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). For example, *Horse Racing* – as noted above, advertised as a "great party game" – was not simple in any way. The twenty-page manual was jammed with detail about judging the computer-generated horses' performance, graphs indicating how 'coaxing' and 'whipping' simulations worked, and even a recommendation to keep a written record of the races with detailed observations.

Unlike canonical Intellivision titles like *Horse Racing*, the *Party Line* games replaced sophistication with simplification. *Space Cadet*, for example, did not require reading a manual to play. It used the direction pad for moving the space saucers, but players did not even need to press an action button to fire. Players merely flew their spaceship over a twinkling star and the shot fired automatically. Julie Hoshizaki, the game's programmer, emphasized she did this "just to make it simple" to play in a party atmosphere (interview, 20 August 2025). Hoshizaki's design simplified interaction even beyond the arcade norm of joystick plus button. *Space Cadet* reduced gameplay to basic movement, which facilitated sharing the controller between party guests.

Beyond the controllers, simplification also entailed easily graspable game concepts. Partiers needed to grab the controller and quickly understand what to do. Attention would be divided when gaming alongside talking, eating, drinking, and cavorting. Simple games would facilitate incorporation into multifaceted festivities. The simplicity of *Party Line* games recalls *Biplanes* which, as discussed above, was often played by Applications Software staff during work breaks. It thus anticipated the vision for party games in terms of design and social context. William Fisher, one of the *Party Line* proposal's authors, agreed that *Biplanes* "could have been a seed for making us think" about party games: "It was a party, a mini party, every day" (interview, 20 August 2025).

Simplicity implied a second design theme, short-term play, with brief turns more akin to arcade experiences. For example, in *Blow Out* the rounds of dropping darts on balloons last just 30 seconds. One can imagine thrusting the controller into the

hands of a new player and yelling quickly, “move the skater with the disk and press the button to throw darts at the balloons!”.

Shortened temporalities had implications within Applications Software itself. In a section titled “Simplicity of Game Design”, the proposal’s authors assert that party games could have rapid development cycles requiring less debugging and game logic programming. The simplicity of party games would even result in “shorter, simpler (and less expensive) instruction books” (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5). During the second generation, cartridge memory restrictions were key. With their simple gameplay and graphics, party games would be less constrained by this issue, the authors explained. Furthermore, programmers could use “faster but less efficient programming tools” to accelerate production (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5). Since party games would not require fastidious programming techniques to save ROM space, development could be accelerated using available tools (like Mr. Color, a graphics design program created at Mattel Electronics).⁵ The smaller size also meant that multiple games could be included in a single cartridge, as happened with *Party Line*.

Simplification and short-term play shape our third design theme, stimulation. Instead of complex simulations, stimulations embrace the energy of play, vibrant graphics, sound intensity, and affective properties of socialization. Instead of simulating a day at the football stadium or horse track, one is stimulating the senses: balloons pop, planets change color, windows break. A few titles proposed for *Party Line* explicitly linked partying to stimulation. In ‘Party Animals’, players control animals trying not to destroy a city street as they head to a party: “moose with wide antlers, kangaroos with long tails, hippos that weigh a ton! Players must keep destruction to a minimum” (Robinson, n.d. a). Players are also animals in another never-developed game, ‘Punch Line’. They must keep drinks and snacks flowing at a party trying to appease the animals’ appetites and prevent their awkward bodies from damaging the house. Partying becomes a theme and an aesthetic, an energetic style that shapes a game’s look, sound, feel, and gameplay. Party games were imagined as a lively new art, as Henry Jenkins might say, embracing “the excess kinetic energy that has always surrounded gameplay” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 34).

The completed *Party Line* games foreground stimulation as well. For instance, *Blow Out* is part dance club, part roller derby, part carnival, part party – the game aims to stimulate players through its multicolor graphics, bouncy music, loud pops, and quick, rollerskating action (a popular leisure activity in the early 1980s). When a round ends, streamers and confetti pour down the screen as the rollerskaters jiggle frenetically. This is one of the first moments of juiciness—a colorful, over-the-top spectacle in casual games that “gives excessive amounts of positive feedback in response to the player’s actions” (Juul, 2009, p. 45). A blowout, after all, means a lavish party bent on excessive stimulation. *Blow Out*’s working title in the proposal

⁵ See Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 5.

was 'Gang Bang' – a name that would never pass the marketing censors at a toy company. This name also connoted excessive stimulation: transgressive sexuality and street violence, aggressive racial and gendered connotations. Long before *Gang Beasts* took the party game scene by storm, *Blow Out* ran with the idea that the rollerskaters (these "rude guys", as the proposal called them) would "keep bumping into each other and knocking each other off the scaffold" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 6). While 'Gang Bang' was a joke, the humor included in the Party Line proposal invokes the 'frat party' feeling that McDivitt critiqued as an aspect of the early videogame industry.

Space Cadet's gameplay also reflects ideas of a lively party with jostling bodies, though without the frat party affect: while trying to touch the twinkling stars, players can smack into each other, a bumper-car-like game mechanic that further encourages interaction between teams – virtual and perhaps physical interaction as well. Like the sugary snacks and intoxicating libations that often accompany a party, the Party Line games were imagined as electronic stimulants. The games did not simulate parties but stimulated them. Indeed, Hoshizaki explained that the simple games were designed with inebriated players in mind, reflected in the title of *Space Cadet*, which also means someone who is confused, spacy, and out of touch with reality.

As design principles, simplification, short-term play, and stimulation were all aimed at producing enjoyable experiences – but all three presumed the context of our fourth design principle, socialization. Simplicity allowed for including as many potential players as possible. Short-term play encouraged cooperative interaction when sharing a game. Stimulation aligned game aesthetics with party aesthetics, potentially stimulating conversation about wacky gameplay, sounds, and graphics. Overall, the Party Line proposal was animated by a pervasive concern with the social context of play – imagining how play at parties differs from play at the arcade, at a friend's house, in one's home, or at a store display. The programmers opposed their vision for party games to videogames played at a party which were not designed for the context:

Those not playing are bored... Those who have never played a video game before are too embarrassed to try in a group this size. Those who are already video game fanatics hog the machine and don't give others a chance to try it. (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 3)

The Party Line games would counter these forms of disengagement. They would bring together different parties in the game context: those who are bored, those who are new to videogames, the gaming fanatics. This idea of using a party to bring together different 'parties' is not typical for all parties – but it was a core element of parties at Mattel Electronics, for example, as opportunities to bring programmers and marketers into conversation.

One way to accomplish this socialization – and one way party games radically differ from traditional videogames – is through design that bleeds into the social context. In this regard, a fascinating aspect of the proposal was the idea that “game play extends ‘beyond the cartridge’” (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). When the proposal authors wrote that “the entire party/crowd atmosphere, becomes a part of the game”, they urged a radical rethinking of design that takes play context into account. Handing off controllers, cheering, bumping and jostling other players, drinking: these and other elements could become part of the party game.

To illustrate how this approach differs from incorporating non-party games into parties, we can examine promotion parties in *Intellivision News*. A publication of the Mattel Electronics Game Club, the six issues of this newsletter were produced by a marketing group separate from the programmers in Applications Software. Three times, *Intellivision News* ran articles suggesting parties based on Intellivision videogames: a “Backyard *BurgerTime* Bar-B-Q”, a “Space Action Party”, and a party inspired by *Vectron* (1983b) (Video Entertaining, 1983a; Video Entertaining, 1983b; Video Entertaining, 1983c; Figure 7).

These articles suggest playing videogames at the parties, but then include activities separate from the videogames, though thematically linked to them. The Bar-B-Q idea separates playing *BurgerTime* (Mattel Electronics, 1983a) from party events like a burger-ingredient scavenger hunt and Build-a-Burger relay race. The separation reflects how the single-player *BurgerTime* videogame could not be integrated with the party context directly, but thematically could be linked ‘beyond the cartridge’. For the *Vectron* party, the suggestion is that teams of two compete, taking turns playing the single-player game: “you might even want to make this a father/son or mother/daughter event” (Video entertaining, 1983b). Beyond the cartridge, the article proposed a “video game trivia contest” with questions like “what stops the chef from building hamburgers in *BurgerTime*?” – an attempt to piggyback the massive success of *Trivial Pursuit* (Video Entertaining, 1983b). The article about a Space Action Party was organized around the Intellivision games *Astrosplash* (1981a), *Space Armada* (1981b), *Space Battle* (1979c), *Space Hawk* (1982b), and *Star Strike* (1981c). These are single-player games, and so connections are thematically beyond the cartridge: for example, a party menu including Space Battle Burgers and Astrosplash Punch. In contrast to thematic resonance, Party Line games would integrate social context with the videogames themselves.

However, socialization in party videogame design was largely left to the imagination, not least because *Party Line* was never released before the Crash. *Blow Out*, *Hard Hat*, and *Space Cadet* dabbled with going beyond the cartridge in their gameplay – for example, cueing controller change with music or subtly encouraging physical bumping and nudging. Notes about the ‘Party Animals’ idea included “Listen to your team members who can point out objects in danger”, indicating that the design would have relied on multiple players watching the screen (Robinson, n.d. b).



SPACE ACTION PARTY

Invite your friends to a Space Action party. Send colorful meteor invitations you create from construction paper. Ask your guests to appear in futuristic costumes.

The main event, of course, will be an Intellivision® Space Action Network contest. Players can fight a fierce battle or maneuver through the galaxy. Guests can also create a place in space of their own. A large closet, a room in the basement, the attic, or the garage can be transformed with a little imagination, some paint and recycled materials.

Before the party, check with Mom or Dad to O.K. your flight plan. Then start gathering boxes, empty juice cans, styrofoam, etc. Supply non-toxic paint, brushes, paste, magic markers and scissors and guests can take off. Boxes become space ships, laser guns, robots. Aluminum pie pans become UFO's hung from the ceiling with string. Milk cartons become tiny rockets or missiles. The sky's the limit.

Or guests can create a giant living outer space board game. On a large sheet of kraft wrapping paper

draw squares to make a pathway. Ask each guest to design a square or two. One square, for example, might show a planet being blown up by a Star Strike missile. The directions might read, "Planet Explodes. Go back three spaces." Some spaces, of course, will remain blank. The thing that makes this game special is that the markers are the players themselves. Use dice to determine how many spaces a player can move on each turn.

An Astro Tournament is fun too. Each guest competes in several events. Keep scores from Intellivision® Space Action Network video games and from other games you design. In Word Racer, for example each player must unscramble a list of Intellivision inspired words like "maraad" (Armada).

Just before snacks, play outer space artist. Invite guests to create a poster for their favorite Intellivision Space Action Network game. Cover the posters with clear adhesive paper and they'll make stellar place mats as well as celestial reminders of your adventure in space.

ENTERTAINING

SPACE ACTION PARTY MENU

STAR STRIKE Pop Corn (Cheese Popcorn)
***ASTROSMASH Punch** (3 fruit punch)
***SPACE BATTLE Burgers** (Deviled Burgers)
SPACE HAWK Slaw (Crunch Slaw)
SPACE ARMADA Cookies (Oatmeal Cookies)

*Recipes Included (The others are generic—Mothers usually have recipes)

SPACE BATTLE Burgers

1 pound lean ground beef	2 Tablespoons chopped dill pickle
2 Tablespoons chopped onion	2 Tablespoons French dressing
1 Tablespoon prepared mustard	¼ teaspoon salt
3 Tablespoons catsup	6 slices whole wheat bread toasted
1 Tablespoon mayonnaise	

Mix all ingredients except bread. Spread meat mixture on bread slices and broil 4" from heat source until done. 3 to 5 minutes—makes 6 servings.

ASTROSMASH Punch

2 cups apple juice, chilled	¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 cup orange juice, chilled	1 large banana, peeled, cut into chunks
1 Tablespoon honey	

Measure all ingredients into blender container. Blend at high speed until smooth. Pour into glasses. Makes 6 servings (about 2/3 cup each).

Figure 7. "Space Action Party" (Video Entertaining, 1983a).

These design principles – simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization – articulate an emergent conceptualization of party games in the early video-game industry. They draw on the polysemy of 'party', including typical parties at home but also office parties at Mattel Electronics which served as creative stimu-

lants and avenues for organizational harmony. They link game design with the goal of reaching diverse kinds of players beyond the videogame fanatic, early adopter, or arcade vidiot – and beyond gendered, hegemonic norms of play (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). This anticipates the insight that “parties may represent a powerful method of re-including players who do not identify as (core) gamers” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 76).

The more inclusive design of Party Line games dovetails with other initiatives at Mattel Electronics. While Party Line games were being developed, simplified versions of several Intellivision titles were created for TV POWWW!, where contestants (many of whom were women) could call into a television station and play a brief video game by saying ‘pow’ over the telephone (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2026). In October 1982, four of these games were released in a cartridge, *Sharp Shot*. The lack of discernible connections in the archive between Party Line games, TV POWWW!, and *Sharp Shot* reflects how simplification and short-term play were used in multiple contexts. However, it was these four principles in their totality – simplification, short-term, stimulation, and socialization – that articulated party games as a new, distinct genre. The similarity of these approaches reflects a more inclusive vision of gaming emerging from Mattel Electronics operating in expansive play situations and beyond exclusionary, technomasculine forms of gamer identity emerging at the time (Kocurek, 2015).

The party’s over

The Crash meant that Mattel Electronics never released *Party Line*. In late January of 1984, Robinson (one of the Party Line proposal authors) organized a “Waiting for the End of Mattel” party for Applications Software programmers, who called themselves The Blue Sky Rangers (Robinson, 1984; Figure 8). Even at the end, a party was the modality for programmers to find community and process the depressing end of an era. The flyer contained gallows humor, remarking that Mattel Electronics’ demise was the “first time Mattel’s been ahead of schedule on anything” – a joke that suggested that Mattel Electronics ended before its time, before the party really got going, and before great things like the nearly complete ‘Party Line’ could be released. The End of Mattel Party is a good reminder for party studies that festivity does not define all parties. During the following decades, the Blue Sky Rangers have held annual parties at a pizza joint near their former workplace to recall and reignite the era of Intellivision. The parties outlasted the era itself.

From the practices and experiences of Mattel Electronics, we can draw a range of insights that illuminate the place of party studies in game studies. That place cannot be reduced to party games as such. Nor can it be reduced to festive, rebellious, and spirited gatherings. Nor were all parties and party atmospheres exclusionary, though studying frat-like atmospheres and gender dynamics remains crucial. Parties as organizational practices played a crucial role in fostering creativity and

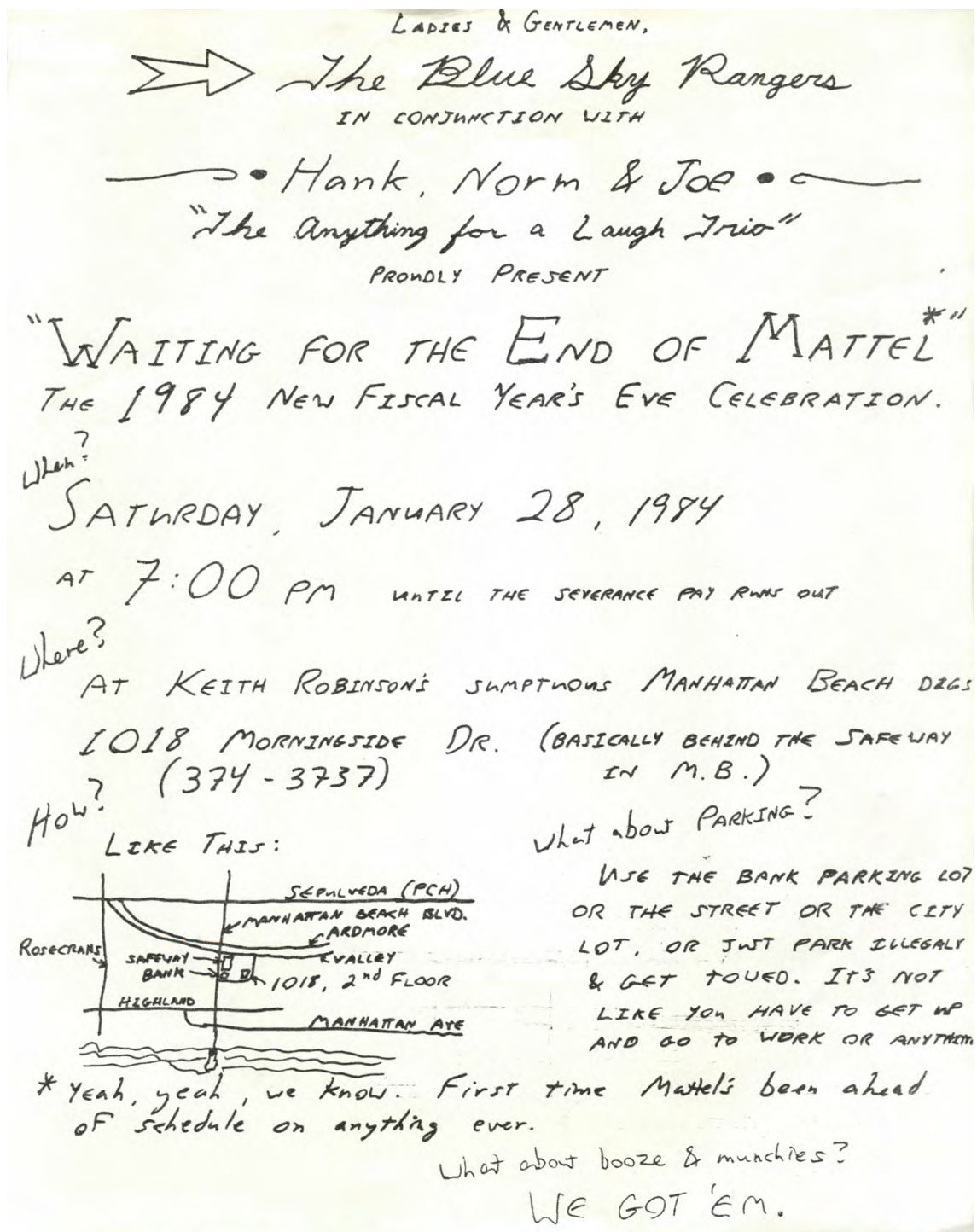


Figure 8. "Waiting for the End of Mattel" party invitation (Robinson, 1984).

teamwork, and had structural implications for weaving together different forms of labor. At Mattel Electronics, party games began to emerge as a genre, indebted to the party ethos that shaped working at Applications Software. This genre was shaped by trends like the influence of arcade-style play, but was distinct in the way it brought together the design principles of simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization.

The 'party idea' that grew out of this synthesis articulated a vision of videogaming that was casual and inclusive, potentially far more welcoming to diverse players. The Crash ended further development of this vision for Intellivision. But despite their relative marginality in game studies and the videogame market, party videogames have continued to appear. We have much to gain from studying their history and transformations. If party studies is an attempt to take seriously what has been often disregarded as frivolous, then it is important to note the cultural work that party games can do within larger historical contexts – like expanding our understanding of diverse gamers and legitimating videogames as an acceptable pastime to skeptical publics.

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