

Introduction to Party Studies

Leland Masek

 [0000-0003-2694-9129](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2694-9129)

Tampere University, Finland

leland.masek@tuni.fi

Jaakko Stenros

 [0000-0003-0320-7042](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0320-7042)

Tampere University, Finland

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LELAND MASEK*  [0000-0003-2694-9129](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2694-9129), leland.masek@tuni.fi

JAAKKO STENROS*  [0000-0003-0320-7042](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0320-7042)

* Tampere University, Finland

Abstract

This special issue expands upon a past research seminar and article to support the value of creating a subfield of ‘party studies’ in game studies. All together six articles compose this special issue with various lenses for how analyzing parties supports the analysis of games and vice versa. Parties are important as a framing within game narratives, as a part of game production history, for how they generate playful communities related to games, and finally how they expand our understanding for analyzing games. We furthermore argue that this kind of subfield endeavor helps us as scholars come together to expand our expertise across the ever more diverse pools of knowledge we study.

Keywords

Parties; party studies; festivities; community; playfulness

What is it that brings people together to party? We ask this question as we think about what we hope to be an emergent area of party studies. This special issue features six articles that all investigate parties and partying in the context of game studies. However, we could just as easily be talking about bringing people together to celebrate in general. That is a foundational question for humans across time, yet academic research offers surprisingly little resources for a person trying to figure out how to throw a good party. We can find analytical concepts, like the *carnavalesque*, *collective effervescence*, or the *liminal/liminoid*, that help us understand why partying is important – yet rarely help us to design one (see also Drife, 2000). Parties are woefully understudied.

On the issue of bringing scholars together around a shared research interest, there is also more work to be done. It is a serious and longstanding concern in the interdisciplinary approach to studying games that scholars may simply talk past each other (Williams, 2005). There are many reasons why connection across discipline, across method, across ontology are difficult (in the context of games, see e.g., Deterding, 2017; Kriz, Harviainen, & Clapper, 2018; Karabinus et al., 2025). We have

different competencies, vocabularies, norms, knowledge constitutive interests, values, and worlds of thought. Yet the rewards for crossing these divides are potentially immense. Debatably, the entire birth of game studies as a field was due to a willingness to bring together diverse forms of thinking around games (even if there were also clear boundaries in the beginning, such as an emphasis on digital games and a preference for positive approaches). It has given rise to important definitional works on games and play, documentation and understanding around game play and creation practices, as well as situated games and play in culture and society more widely. More recently, we have seen the emergence of numerous subfields, such as queer game studies, historical game studies, black game studies, analog game studies, and regional game studies. As with many of these, we are hoping to use the framing of a subfield to bring focus on a specific topic, while also using said subject as a searchlight to identify academic work in other fields that requires integration into game studies. As each year there are more scholarly works and fields, integrative projects become increasingly challenging. A subfield that is clearly located under a specific umbrella while also actively seeking to build on work done in other fields is one answer to the question of how to cross academic divides in order reap the benefits.

Party studies in game studies aims to bring us together. This special issue grew out from an article that argued parties are a form of bringing people together. A specifically playful way of pursuing social connection across local, regional, and larger communities. This special issue aims to expand this line of inquiry for game studies. Its contributions sketch out the types of roads such a subfield can investigate and the value of answering specific questions through the lens of party studies.

The road to party studies

The path to this conception of party studies begins in the fall of 2022. Tampere University Game Research Lab was about to celebrate its 20th anniversary and, to mark the occasion, 'Party' was selected as the theme of the annual work-in-progress Spring Seminar. The topic had been identified as potentially relevant, interesting, and fun for game and play scholars, and the anniversary provided a nice alibi for choosing it. In the seminar call for papers, scholars were invited to explore "the diverse connections between parties/partying and games/play" (Game Research Lab, 2022).

The seminar featured 19 presentations and two keynotes. One of those, 'Parties as Playful Experiences: Why Game Studies Should Study Partying' (Masek & Stenros, 2024), was later published in *Eludamos*. In that article, we argue that parties are akin to games in many ways: e.g., they are a fundamental aspect of human culture engaged in by most humans, and there are structural similarities between parties and games, for example in the way they set up liminoid spaces where normal societal rules and expectations are on pause. Regardless of this, parties have received

scarce academic attention except when associated with risky behaviour, which is similar to how games were treated in academia up until the turn of the Millennium. The article ended with a call to establish party studies as a subfield of games studies: “parties are understudied, misunderstood by most of the past empirical work that address them, and game studies is the right field to study them further” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 90).

The following year, we decided to further facilitate the emergence of such a subfield by committing to a special issue on the topic. The editors of *Eludamos* graciously agreed to our proposal, and a call went out in March 2025. Less than two years later, here we are.

In our earlier party article we had also claimed that “research on parties can be found from a diversity of sources, in part because there is no established ‘party studies’ literature” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 77). In our effort to begin staking out a research area, we reviewed work on parties, hailing from disconnected traditions. We mostly drew from three strands of research: earlier theoretical work that has been presented in game studies, as we argue that game and play studies can offer a fitting umbrella for understanding parties (Sutton-Smith, 2009; Schechner, 2017); empirical research on the dangers of partying, mostly discussing teenagers (Doxbeck & Osberg, 2021), gay men (Hammoud et al., 2017), and recreational drug users as the risk groups (Hunt et al., 2010); and the motivations of people attending parties (Demant & Østergaard, 2007).

When carving out a space for a new research focus, a key step is in establishing predecessors and contemporaries in nearby fields and the literature they have produced that is relevant for the discourse that is emerging. Our background review was far from comprehensive, and there are obviously other pools of research that focus on parties – often with different terminology. One such pool is American sociology, where the access to parties functions as a way to produce social stratification, tying into issues of class, race, and gender (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mears & Mooney, 2024; May & Chaplin, 2008; Mears, 2020).

Nor is this special issue the first of its kind in attempting to gather scholars around partying. Key predecessors include a special issue on parties and celebrations in *The Journal of American Culture* (Elza, Edgerton, & Jackson, 2010), which even includes one article on Nintendo Wii parties (Foster, 2010). There are also thriving academic communities that are adjacent to our endeavour. The closest comes festive studies, which even has its own devoted journal, *Journal of Festive Studies*, which offers “a forum for those who share an interest in the world’s diversity of festivities, including holiday celebrations, family rituals, carnivals, religious feasts, civic parades, commemorations, music festivals, and more” (Journal of Festive Studies, n.d.). Another interesting academic community is event management, which published the *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*. The journal concentrates on “business, sporting, cultural and celebratory events and festivals

around the world” (Jago, 2010). Curiously, both journals omit parties in their descriptions. It is almost like a signal of cultural legitimacy: celebrations and festive commemorations are culturally valuable, while lowly parties are not worth academic attention.

A particularly interesting conversation about parties is taking place in the field of artistic research, where a three volume series called *Party Studies* is being published (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021a). Here, the focus is on the “party as an experimental social form and expression” (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021b, 7). The first book documents and theorizes the house party, the second does this for underground clubs (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2024), and the third one, not yet published, is to address raves and dance clubs. While the approach is different as it originates in artistic research and seems particularly interested in privacy and secrecy, the project seems quite well-aligned with ours, so the matching name is not a problem. While they do not focus on play and games, their approach is quite playful. In the first volume, the introduction ends with a call that nicely encapsulates their project:

From the passion of festivity, the transformative joy of partying, and the numbing ache of the hangover to a politics of home-making, resistance, and sleep, *Party Studies* is put forward as a generative, and rather restless method and discourse, and maybe even, a way of life, which may help in keeping the party alive as an imaginative and extremely promiscuous enactment. (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021b, 9)

In sexuality studies, there is also a subset of works focused on organized semi-public events where participants exhibit various sexual behaviors typified as ‘parties’. These parties have been discussed in a variety of social contexts, including for their medical dangers (Friedman et al., 2008) but also for the motivations for participants as a form of play (Harviainen & Frank, 2018). This literature in general seems to bear a closer connection to discussing the phenomena through the language of games and play, including one the more influential books on the topic having an entire chapter on ‘Games People Play: Group Sex as Experimentation, Adventure, and Play’ (Frank, 2013, p. 167).

In addition to these disconnected domains of scholarly work on parties, it is obvious that there must be – as there always is – interesting research that is not available in English (for a completely random example, see Hemmersad & Hodne, 1979). Clearly, a comprehensive and systemic literature review on studies on parties and partying, from the point of view of game studies, is sorely needed.

In this way, our call to game studies is not the emergence of a completely new topic or area of interest, but rather a call for game studies to host more of the party. This begs the question of what game studies has to offer an academic field on festivities, rituals, and partying. In addition, the opposite question is asked: how

does a deeper understanding of parties help game scholars understand our field better? This special issue provides several articles with useful answers to both.

Games and parties as a dual framing offers several critical values for scholars who wish to understand partying, or games better. On the one hand, games, both in their communities of play and production, are their own cultural space that host their own forms of parties. Game industries around the world have hosted numerous parties as a site of important work within the fields of games, both historically and contemporaneously. Player communities gather for parties, whether at game conventions or local area network parties, online gatherings of friends, or other forms of social celebration of their gameplay. On the other hand, games are specifically designed to enrich 'parties' to the point that many festivals or celebrations incorporate formal games. It is interesting to ponder why, how, and in what way these games transform the experience of their party. The reverse is also true that parties exist within the fiction and mechanics of certain games, to heighten and change the play of those games.

Games as digital spaces also host parties, and utilize these parties in their design in order to provide players with unique experiences. This form of digital partying may become increasingly relevant as a more digital world may transform several of its cultural forms of partying. The adaptations to COVID-19 already saw a massive world shift in which individuals attempted, successfully and not to digital spaces as the new form of partying. These adaptations bear transformative meaning to the culture of parties.

In addition, the very structure of a party becomes a clearer point of focus when placed in the lens of game studies. It is revealing that by investigating the concepts of play and playfulness, partying emerged as a foundational type of playful experience for many individuals. This conceptual center reveals some of the value for the current works compared to previous scholarly approaches to parties. In the most recent special issue of the *Journal of Festive Studies* (Valerio, 2025), the words 'play', 'playing', 'playful', and to a lesser extent 'games' are used throughout the texts to describe the practical behaviors occurring in festivities. Their usages however are primarily cursory, where the conceptual essence of play or playfulness is bearing relatively little weight in explaining the phenomena. In this way, game studies conceptually reframes and centers playing, playfulness, and games as a fundamental lens for partying. In looking at parties through this lens, fundamental questions about certain partying activities become clearer. Questions such as: what rules and norms are followed in these parties? Which are broken? What playful behaviors are participants in this party doing? What playful experiences are participants having?

In this way, we clarify three primary manners that party studies in game studies offers: games hosting parties both for characters and players; parties in game creation and the surrounding ecosystem; and finally parties as playful structures with

their own rules frequently inhabited by playful experiences and play behaviors much akin to games.

Introduction to the articles

This special issue moves party studies forward in each of the proposed ways with a wide selection of approaches. First, three articles analyze parties in specific games, either as player-initiated festivities or as stable elements in the game's narrative. Ash Rezvani's article, 'The (Drop) Party Revolution: Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's *RuneScape*', discusses a specific type of celebration in an online roleplaying game where players create parties that are not facilitated or encouraged by the game service. In 'drop parties' higher-level characters distribute both worthless and valuable items to lower-level characters. In this manner, the specific party activity of sharing these game-item 'drops' is culturally dependent on the game it is hosted by. Rezvani analyses this historical practice in *RuneScape* with the concept of *communitas*.

This is followed by a pair of articles that analyze partying as a diegetic and non-diegetic framing within contemporary digital games. Tim Timvig & Carl-Erik Engqvist dive into a specific single-player digital game in their article 'Getting High in a Hi-tech Setting: Narrative Structure and Archetypical Partygoers in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* Mission: "Party"'. They analyse the narrative structure of the party and explore the functions the different characters inhabit in these fictional party settings. They also bring a deeper analytic framework of this party based on game studies theory, specifically integrating Caillois' (1958/2001) classic paradigm for rule-boundedness with a more contemporary expansion upon it (Masek, 2023).

Matilda Ståhl and Fredrik Rusk embrace parties on two levels. Their article, 'Party of Two at a Fraternity Party! Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*', firstly features an analysis of the representations of parties in an online multiplayer game. Secondly, they discuss the meta-position of doing duoethnographic research as a form of partying between scholars.

These three works, when placed into conversation with each other, highlight the deep value of looking at instances of play, games, and partying *in situ*. By closely analyzing specific instances of partying in games, layers of expectations and especially rules become revealed as interdependent frames for the experience. Timvig and Engqvist demonstrate how analyzing a variety of rule interactions in fictional parties allow for a deeper understanding for how cultural expectations of parties may emerge and how diverse forms of enjoyment may need to be constructed in games. Ståhl and Rusk similarly demonstrate how norms and rules within a game-party mix with norms of player groups, of people themselves, and even the rules of conducting research in academia. They present an ongoing reflection for how they as scholars follow certain norms that may or may not align with local player cul-

ture, or even each other, highlighting the critical need for understanding intersectionality in our perspective. Finally, Rezvani's closely examined instance of partying in the context of *Runescape* bears numerous critical layers for rules. The author describes how a specific egalitarian frame of a party where players seek to share valuable loot still faces layers of structure and hierarchy from the game developers themselves. In this way, we see how important it is to analyze the layers of meaning of specific parties occurring in specific games.

Two articles then address the game industry and the parties that have both historically and contemporaneously been vital to the production of games. Tom Boellstorff and Braxton Soderman's article is an opening into party game production studies. Their article, "Get on the Party Line: Parties, Games, and Work at Mattel Electronics in the Early 1980s", discusses the parties and party-like aspects of the work culture at Mattel Electronics and explores the emergence of party video-games for Intellivision in the early 1980s. The impetus for the party line was sociability: videogames should be something fun to do together.

Taina Myöhänen also expands this analysis of party behavior in the game industry, through a contemporary and regional game studies angle. The article, titled "Those People Are My People": Safety at Game Industry Events in Finland', analyses game industry events through the prism of party studies. This shifts the attention from instrumental values to social interaction. Based on interviews, the article argues that safety is a precondition for a successful event and maps how a feeling of safety is communally produced.

These articles together demonstrate the critical value of analyzing the phenomena of partying in game production. If parties, as theorized, are valuable ways of bringing people together, these texts highlight successful forms of party-making in bringing together game makers. These texts address similar critical lenses such as inclusion, gender, diversity, felt safety, and fun for successful parties. This technique of game production bears valuable fruit for any scholar interested in understanding successful game industry bonding, gatherings, and partying.

Finally, the special issue is closed by an article that looks at parties that are not directly related to games with an approach strongly informed by game studies and the broader concept of playfulness. Aska Mayer, Velvet Spors, and J. Tuomas Harvainen analyse three playful transformative events in their article "We Poke the Body and See What Happens...": How Do People Manage Expectations in Transformative Parties, Festivals, and Retreats?'. They explore how event organizers engage in expectation management. These pre-event processes help in getting participants on the same page; they have a shared understanding of the party and find a common vibe.

This text brings to the front and center a theme present throughout these texts. In addition to game studies gaining value from understanding parties, the theories

built in game studies bear analytic value to unpack partying as phenomena. Whether it is a deeper understanding of playful experience or different player relationships to rules, partying and games bear more than a superficial similarity. They are structural, they are inhabited often by play, they can be spaces of joy, fun, transgression, and bonding. They also bear major cultural meaning for those involved and face complicated intervention from structures of power both inside and outside their intended experience.

Interestingly, many of the articles in this special issue also touch on the topic of party studies as a potential or emerging subfield. For example, Boellstorff and Soderman argue for approaching parties as organizational practices, while Ståhl and Rusk, inspired by the idea that game nights are parties, position their duoethnography as “party like”. These meta-contributions also maybe pave the way for establishing norms of this emerging approach.

In this way, the final contribution of this special issue is the development of the meta-knowledge of party studies as a subfield in game studies. In seeing how diverse scholars have taken this frame and applied it for their own purposes, with their own research foci, and their own methods, we have found our initially intended frame opened admirably. What form party studies takes, if it becomes a stable subfield, is still unclear. It is our hope that this special issue shows how fruitful the centering of parties in analysis can be.

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